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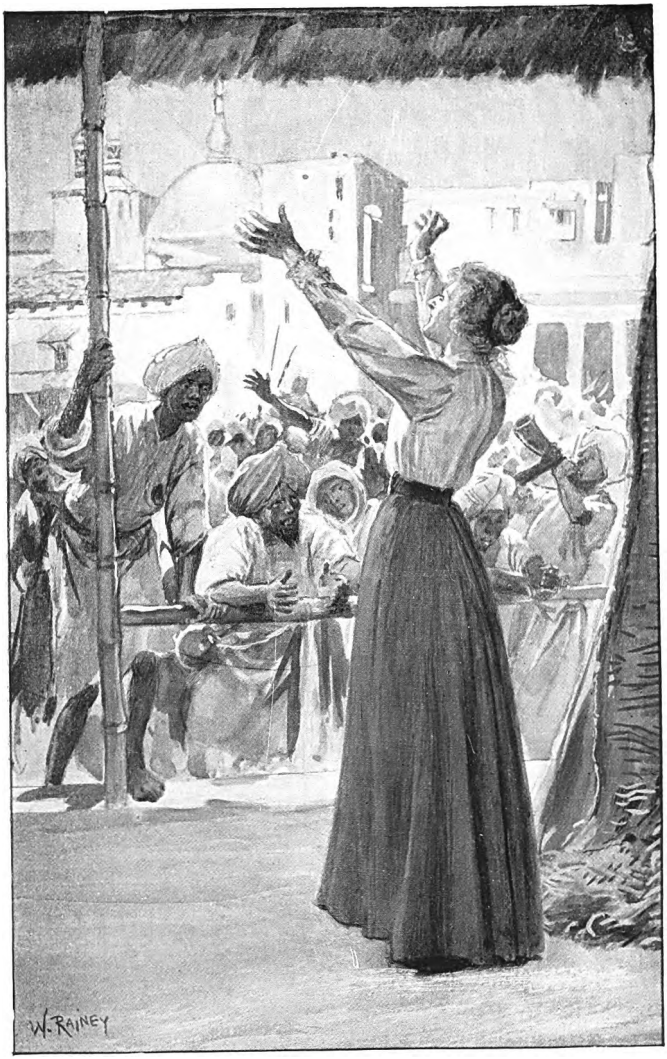

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"LUKSHMEE IS PURDAH!"

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THE GIRL CAPTIVES

A STORY OF THE INDIAN FRONTIER

BY

BESSIE MARCHANT

Author of "The Bonded Three" &c.

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS BY WILLIAM RAINEY, R.I.

LONDON

BLACKIE & SON, LIMITED, 50 OLD BAILEY, E.C.

GLASGOW AND DUBLIN

1900

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THE GIRL CAPTIVES.

CHAPTER I.

CHRISSIE FELTON'S GUESTS.

IT was the time of the great fair of Rampoostan, and the broad open space before the temple, where Lukshmee had her shrine, was crowded with tents of every conceivable shape and hue, from the ragged, dirty bit of canvas which the Wazirabad melon-seller had erected over his merchandise, to the smart blue-and-white striped marquee, where a conjurer brought live snakes from empty pill-boxes, and, putting them back again, changed them into mosquitoes whilst you waited.

Outside these clustering streets of canvas houses were gathered flocks of goats brought down from far-away hill-pastures, sturdy oxen, patient mules, and hundreds of lean, scraggy fowls, either tied by the legs, or cooped in crates of rough bamboo. Ponderous elephants were there, that had drawn yet more ponderous loads of wood from the distant forests of Mashmaghar, for Rampoostan was in the

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midst of a practically treeless country, and material for building, and for firing also, had to be dragged over many a score of miles of dusty plain-road.

There were performing tigers too, splendid creatures these, confined in cages that looked not half strong enough to hold them, as they lay basking in the sultry heat, and calmly licking appreciative lips, as the curious throng of gazers pressed, half-awed, right up to the bars of their temporary prison.

And what a din filled the air! A confusion of tongues that outrivalled Babel itself; a wild shrieking of frightened and indignant parroquets, which chafed at their bondage much more than the tigers; the frantic howling and yelling of a company of devout Patialan pilgrims, who were gashing themselves with sharp knives, until the bright red of their blood mingled with the dull red of the plain dust, and caked into hard mud beneath their feet.

In and out among the motley attractions of the fair surged the crowd, a composite of every nationality on the face of the earth, and of hues as diverse as their race.

There was a voluble French quack doctor from Bombay, who chattered and gesticulated with characteristic eloquence and grace; there were glib-tongued merchants from almost every quarter of the Asiatic continent, with solemn-toned Hindoos, and heavy contingents of hill Kajids, more untamed and untamable than the tigers, and whose hesitating gutturals were to be heard on all sides, as they struggled and fought their way amidst the seething humanity with the frightened air of men in unusual and suspicious surroundings.

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There were Chinamen who hobnobbed with Jews; Turkish merchants displaying gems of dazzling magnificence; enterprising traders from the Fatherland, with articles many and various, but all labelled "Made in Germany"; a Swede or two; the ubiquitous American tourist; and dotted here and there the familiar British soldier, good-natured and obliging, and with the ready smile and inconsequent chaff of his order.

Into all this hurry and confusion of buying and selling came Chrissie Felton, tightly gripping the flowing draperies of her ayah, as though fearful of being separated from her in the crush. Vastly entertained and amused was she by the unwonted bustle and stir of the great fair, and fought and struggled through the thickest of the crowd, thinking it all very good fun indeed. There was an orderly somewhere in the background who was supposed to be in charge of the pair, but it was difficult to keep together in such a throng, and, provided she did not lose her ayah, Chrissie troubled not at all about the escort and protection of Private Ford.

Most of the European population, as well as the native, had turned out to view the spectacle, and Chrissie encountered more than one acquaintance in her progress. Once she was wedged into a corner by the curio stall of Lal Musjid, and within reach of her hand, if she had stretched it out, were a family group, at sight of whom she coloured and shrank, her gaiety disappearing as though with a sudden blight.

It was only the Boyds, and Miss Juliet Boyd, who

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was in charge of the little party, nodded and smiled pleasantly at poor Chrissie; but Gwen and Jessie stared at her with their hard black eyes, giving her no greeting at all, whilst the tips of their supercilious noses took a higher tilt in the air, and every line and curve of their small persons bristled with aggressive superiority. They had with them a splendid baby—chubby, rosy, and beautiful—who was carried by a devoted and perspiring ayah.

Chrissie, who was an ardent baby-worshipper, would have delighted in seizing upon the infant and smothering him with kisses, but the repellent stare of his two sisters was more than sufficient to deter her from taking any such liberty.

A minute later the Boyds passed on and out of sight, but Chrissie lingered with her ayah close by Lal Musjid's stall, not caring to risk another encounter with these unfriendly neighbours.

Lal Musjid had a large collection of gods and goddesses to dispose of, foremost among them being the image of Lukshmee, who, as the goddess of wealth and worldly prosperity, was naturally much sought after by all who desired to get on in the world. Lal Musjid was not unlike some of the deities figuring upon his stall, an old man with fierce eyes and a cruel mouth, whose whole aspect savoured of greed, from the topmost fold of his dingy yellow turban, down to the torn sandals that were bound upon his feet with strips of cotton cloth.

Chrissie knew him well, for he did not belong to the promiscuous throng that this carnival of barter had brought to Rampoostan, but was a resident in

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the town, who joined money-lending to his trade of image and curio selling, and made it pay well too, by reason of the exorbitant interest he charged, and the promptness with which he foreclosed upon such luckless wights as failed to pay.

He was having a wordy argument now with a man from Beshawur, who wanted to purchase a small image of Lukshmee to carry home with him to his distant state, but objected to the price demanded by Lal Musjid.

"It is the price of a mule, or three goats—surely a god should be cheaper than that?" he said in the Urdu tongue.

"Doubtless, my brother, some gods might be; but think of the manifold beauties and graces of this same Lukshmee; think what her presence in thine house will mean, the wealth she will cause to flow into it, the prosperity she will bring, so that thy neighbours shall falter and wax weak through envy, saying, 'Lukshmee is gone to abide at his house', and by reason of her thou shalt tread underfoot the man that is thine enemy."

"It is too much, too much!" returned the man from Beshawur; "make it but the price of one goat, brother-of-the-ancient-beard, and lo, the price is here!" so saying, he twitched the string he held in his hand, the other end of which was secured round the neck of a big active goat with long, silky hair, that trotted close at the heels of its master, and seemed scarcely to need a tethering cord at all.

Lal Musjid bestowed a critical scrutiny on the animal, as if disposed to entertain the idea of barter; but finally he shook his head, saying

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slowly, "The goat is good—for a goat; and if there were two it might be done. But part with a goddess for one goat! Why, Lukshmee would spit upon me when I entered her temple, because that I had held her image so lightly as to part with it for such a price."

The man from Beshawur nodded his head slowly in acceptance of the merchant's decision, then he turned away; and Chrissie noticed for the first time that he was accompanied by a veiled female, who carried a baby as big and as bonny as the Boyd infant, only this one had a skin brown as a ripe chestnut, and was clothed in nothing at all.

Lal Musjid had no mind to let a possible customer slip through his fingers so easily, and this man from Beshawur had doubtless more than one solitary goat to offer in barter, and if not, there were less expensive deities for sale upon the stall; a plaster cast of Yumu that had sustained a broken nose, another of Doorga that lacked an arm, and so on through a lengthy catalogue of infirm and crippled objects of worship.

"Stay, brother-from-the-distant-hills," croaked he, in a harsh voice that he strove in vain to render suave and kindly in its tone; "other gods I have which thou mayest take in exchange for thy goat, an thou willest not to pay the price of the Lukshmee."

But the man from Beshawur shook his head with a sorrowful pathos that went straight to the susceptible heart of Chrissie Felton, who only remembered that a fellow-creature wanted something he could not have, and entirely forgot that to help him to obtain it was but to encourage idolatry, and

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thus do violence to the missionary instincts of her careful upbringing.

"Lal Musjid, how much do you want in rupees for that Lukshmee?" she cried, starting forward eagerly, at the same time motioning with her hand to the man from Beshawur to wait a moment.

Lal Musjid's eyes twinkled gleefully. He greatly preferred rupees to Beshawur goats, and supposed that the missi-baba had taken a fancy to the image on her own account, never dreaming that she would want to purchase it only to bestow in charity. So he salaamed very low, causing his sweeping robes to trail in the dust, and named a price that was absurdly small as compared with the compensation he had asked from the owner of the goat.

With fingers that trembled from haste and excitement, Chrissie drew forth her purse and counted the price into the dusky palm of the idol-monger; then, seizing the Lukshmee with both hands, she held it towards the hill stranger, saying, with a beaming face, "Here, man from Beshawur, take your idol, and may it bring you luck!"

The man took it, because it was thrust into his hands, but from his puzzled face it was easy to see that he did not understand.

"It is thine own, man from Beshawur," put in the idol-monger, but with chagrin on his face and in his heart, for had he guessed the benevolence of the young lady's intention he would have demanded just double the price.

"Will the missi-baba take the goat?" murmured the rough man from the hills, bowing low before Chrissie and dragging at the tethering cord.

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"No, no, good man, it is a gift, a gift for which there is nothing to pay," she urged, and marvelled in her heart that he knew so little by practical experience of the nature and uses of philanthropy.

The man from Beshawur shook his head doubtfully still, and answered in his best Urdu, "They of my tribe give no gifts; if aught is bestowed, it is a debt that is some day to be paid."

"But you won't be able to pay me," laughed Chrissie, "unless you come to the fair again next year, and my father is still stationed at Rampoostan."

"It is a debt," reiterated the man with slow, dogged persistence, "and some day, when the gods will, it shall be paid."

Chrissie laughed again, and gave up the attempt to enlighten this strange ignorance. Instead, she approached the veiled woman, and asked permission to touch the baby.

"I wouldn't go near it if I were you, Miss Chrissie," put in Private Ford in a warning voice. He had just discovered the whereabouts of his charge, and hastened to give her the benefit of his advice and protection.

"Are you afraid it will bite, Ford?" she asked; then, wilfully disregarding his caution, took the brown baby from its mother's arms and hugged it closely, lavishing many caresses and endearments upon it.

But the figure inside the veil seemed fearful lest the infant was to be claimed in exchange for the idol, and, stretching out her arms, cried in a passionate, yearning tone: "It is the first-born of Musef, her man-child Narudu; the missi-baba may

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not take him in exchange for the goddess, the great and all-powerful Lukshmee."

"No, no, I wouldn't keep him, the darling! Why, he would be more troublesome than the goat even; at least, he would need more attention," Chrissie exclaimed, giving Musef back her baby; and then, in response to another admonition from Private Ford, whose sense of propriety was outraged by the blandishments bestowed on the brown infant from Beshawur, Chrissie consented to turn her steps homewards, and the little party slowly disentangled themselves from the thronging crowds of the fair, making their way towards the European quarter of the ugly little town.

That night a tremendous thunderstorm broke over Rampoostan, accompanied by a pelting deluge of rain which wrecked the frail rows of tents and booths, destroyed merchandise, and wrought great havoc with the trade and business of the fair, besides bringing much inconvenience and discomfort on the crowds that had thronged to the town for pleasure or profit as the case might be.

The downpour did not abate when morning came, and it seemed almost as though the rains had set in a full three weeks before their usual time.

Chrissie was standing on the verandah of Captain Felton's house, anxiously surveying this unexpected break-up of the weather, for her father was away on outpost survey, and the rains might considerably retard his return.

In all her fourteen years she had clung chiefly to her father, her mother's exceeding delicacy having thrown her upon his care and companionship.

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She was rather small for her age—a pale, shy girl, with a great fund of quiet humour, and a large stock of well-developed independence. Her eyes had a wistful look in their gray depths, and her brown hair hung smooth and straight, making her look really older than she was.

This was one of Mrs. Felton's bad days, and Chrissie knew that in all probability she would not be admitted to her mother's room until evening, perhaps not then; and the thought of the long lonely day before her, with no society but that of Uma the ayah, or Private Ford, who was major-domo of the house during the captain's absence, made her gray eyes even more pathetic than usual, as she stood watching the pelting rain.

Then the sound of a wailing cry smote her ear, a child's cry, and she craned her head round the kus-kus tatties in order to see from whence it came.

In front of the verandah was a small compound filled with flower-beds, and bounded by a wall which separated it from the public road.

The wailing came from the direction of this road, and Chrissie was seized by a sudden desire to see who was in trouble. Catching up a big sun-umbrella which stood in the corner, and opening it as a protection from the rain, she ran down the verandah steps, and along the paved path to the gate.

A few yards along the road, and sheltered slightly by an angle in the wall, were a man and woman crouching in the thick mud of the highway, as though endeavouring to shield with their own bodies some object over which they were bowed in

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anxious solicitude. Close at hand stood a large and handsome goat.

In a moment Chrissie recognized them as the party from Beshawur, to whom she had given the coveted Lukshmee, and not even staying to pick her way among the mud puddles of the road, which but yesterday had been ankle-deep in dust, she rushed up to the group, asking what was the matter.

"It is the infant Narudu—he is sick, he will die, and there is no place of shelter in all the town," cried the woman, looking up with an agony of despair in her eyes. She was unveiled now, having torn off her chuddar to wrap it round the shivering body of the wailing infant, who rolled and writhed as though in great pain, striking out with his chubby brown fists, and turning up his eyes until the whites alone were visible.

It would have required a much harder heart than Chrissie Felton's to have passed by a need like this, and without a moment's hesitation she exclaimed: "Quick, quick, bring the poor baby in here; oh, it is too dreadful that he should be exposed to this pelting rain!"

With a glad cry of thankfulness and relief, Musef rose to her feet, and, hugging the sick baby in her arms, followed swiftly after the little girl, while the man and the goat brought up the rear.

Along the paved path of the compound and up the verandah steps ran Chrissie as fleetly as a young deer. Flinging her drenched umbrella carelessly aside on the verandah, Chrissie pressed forward into the dining-room, and threw open the

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door of the little pink-and-white chamber which was her own especial domain.

The woman followed her unhesitatingly, although her muddy feet and dripping garments left an ugly trail across the matting of the floor.

"Put him here on my charpoy," commanded the young Samaritan, flinging back the coverings of her own bed, the dainty drapings of which were pink-and-white like the rest of the room.

But Musef shrank back with an awed gesture. "It is the resting-place of the gods?" she asked in a tone of affright.

"No, no; it is only the charpoy I sleep on at night, put him there, and take these wet clothes off him, whilst I send for the doctor," commanded the young hostess with an authoritative wave of her hand, as she hurried from the room in search of Private Ford.

He was not hard to find, being just inside the door of the cook-house, engaged in a lively altercation with the native cook, whom he had detected in some fault of pilfering, or wastefulness.

"Ford, Ford, run for the doctor, quick, quick!" cried Chrissie in a tone of breathless eagerness. She had rushed out on to the back verandah, which overlooked the cook-house and the servants' quarters.

"Is the mistress worse, Miss Chrissie?" he asked anxiously, for he had often been despatched in similar haste when Mrs. Felton had been more than usually ill.

"Run, run, don't waste a minute," she cried, darting back into the house, too much absorbed by

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the brown baby's need to pay any heed to Ford's anxious query.

Away splashed Ford through the mud and the rain, intent on getting back again with Dr. Perry in tow with as little delay as possible.

Holding his head well down, to protect his face from the rain, he did not notice, as he passed the front of the house, that a man and a goat were in occupation of the verandah, or it is extremely probable that he would at once have turned back to discover the reason of their presence.

Dr. Perry was not at home, and Private Ford had a lively chase round the crowded town before he found him. When at last he was successful in his search, and explained to the doctor that Mrs. Felton was ill, and in urgent need of his assistance, the poor orderly was almost as wet as the man from Beshawur, and very much more uncomfortable.

"I'll ride round at once," said Dr. Perry, adding, as he took out his note-book, and crouched for shelter under the overhanging roof of a chupatti stall, while he wrote a hasty prescription, "and do you take this paper to my house. Blathwaite is at home, and will put the remedies together; it may save time, and if I want anything more I can send from the house."

Private Ford took the paper, and went splashing back by the way he had come, while the doctor, flinging himself into the saddle, rode furiously, as was his wont, in the direction of Captain Felton's house.

He was a little astonished, when he arrived there, to find a fine large goat contentedly sampling the

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vegetation of the compound, and a very stolid native sitting on the top step of the verandah, as though it was a throne, and he the rajah of that particular district.

This solemn figure moved aside to let him pass, and the doctor noticed that the man had a large, and seemingly heavy burden bound upon his back.

"Oh, Dr. Perry, I thought you were never coming!" cried Chrissie, bursting out from the dining-room, and seizing upon the doctor as he reached the verandah.

"I came directly I knew, but I was not at home, and Ford had to run over half the town to find me. When was she taken, Miss Chrissie; I thought she seemed better when I saw her yesterday?"

"It isn't mother, but the baby, and he is so dreadfully ill!" she answered in a breathless tone, leading the way to her own room, followed by the puzzled doctor, who knew nothing of any baby in that house.

Musef was bending over the bed when he entered, but she shrank back in a timid manner at sight of the strange, white sahib, her movement revealing the convulsed form of the baby Narudu.

He took in the situation at a glance, but did not stop to comment upon it, for the infant's condition was too critical for time to be wasted; and issuing a few sharp orders, which Chrissie and the ayah flew to obey, he set himself to the conflict with death, that had to be fought on the brown baby's behalf.

An hour of unceasing effort on the part of the doctor and his helpers, and then a slight betterment

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was visible in the small patient's condition, and in all haste Chrissie ran out to the verandah to carry the good news to the stolid man from Beshawur, who was the baby's father.

She arrived on the scene at an opportune moment, for Private Ford, having returned from his errand, and discovered the goat in the compound, was actively endeavouring to eject it.

"Stop, stop, you must not drive it out, Ford!" she called, in a voice of authority.

"Where does the creature come from, Miss Chrissie; is it yours?" asked Ford, staying his hand for a moment, past experience of the young lady's purchases having taught him to be surprised at nothing in this direction.

"No, it is not mine, it belongs to this stranger from the hills; and his poor little baby is lying ill in my bedroom," retorted Chrissie, with a desire to shock Private Ford, who was a staunch upholder of class distinctions, and looked upon coloured people as not merely inferior to his own race, but in point of intelligence and capacity as ranking even lower than a horse.

"Miss Chrissie," he ejaculated in solemn tones, "do you really mean for a truth that you've got a blackamoor baby in your room?"

"I do, indeed. Dr. Perry is there with him now. But you needn't have a fit, Ford, for the sickness isn't catching," she said, laughing at the horror depicted in his face.

But Private Ford turned away, too utterly scandalized to expostulate.

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CHAPTER II.

THE BOYDS AT HOME.

IN the next bungalow, but one, to that occupied by Captain Felton, lived Major Boyd, who had been drafted to Rampoostan about six months previously.

A proud man was the major, and his wife was prouder still. Unfortunately, their means were not in proportion to their ideas, and the consequence was a continual fret against untoward circumstances, with a fierce, though ineffectual wrestle against ever-increasing poverty.

Mrs. Boyd was granddaughter to an earl, and the major was the only son of a baronet's younger brother; but these facts were not altogether an advantage, when taken in conjunction with scanty means and heavy expenses.

They had three children, too, who were growing more expensive as the years went on, and needing more at the hands of their sorely-pressed father and mother. Gwen, the eldest girl, was just past her fifteenth birthday; Jessie, the younger, was thirteen and a half. After these two came a blank of over twelve years, accounted for by three little graves in a Bombay cemetery, and then the youngest of the family, baby Wyn, named after his great-uncle, Sir Wyndham Boyd, of Evington Towers.

The only remaining person in the major's family circle was Miss Juliet Boyd, his young sister, a girl

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of twenty-two, who acted as governess to Gwen and Jessie, and joined hands with Mrs. Boyd in keeping expenses down, and making one rupee go as far as two.

Miss Juliet had a sad chapter in her past, which had tinged with melancholy an otherwise cheerful temperament. She had come out to India three years before to be married to a lieutenant in her brother's regiment, but when she arrived, it was to find that the young officer had succumbed to cholera.

Mrs. Boyd had been very kind to her in those days of heavy trouble, and Juliet was thankful for the opportunity of paying, at least in part, her debt of gratitude. As she was thoroughly accomplished, a brilliant pianist, a skilled linguist, and a talented artist, the services she rendered were a greatly-valued boon in the household of her impoverished kin.

But even with this help it was hard work sometimes to make both ends meet, for Rampoostan was an expensive station, and the major, having unwisely acted as surety for a brother officer in difficulties, had been called upon to pay the amount for which he had made himself liable, and this misfortune added seriously to the embarrassments of the situation.

It had often occurred to Juliet Boyd that she might extend her teaching, and give lessons to others besides her two nieces. But she had been fearful of suggesting such a course to Mrs. Boyd, knowing only too well how greatly that lady would be troubled by any such idea.

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Thoughts fly in circles, according to some wise-acres, and strangely enough, just when Juliet was longing for work, that might bring the means of easing the family burdens, Mrs. Felton was just as anxiously looking for someone to teach Chrissie, whose education was getting sadly in arrears.

But the Feltons were socially much inferior to the Boyds. Captain Felton had risen from the ranks, and though his wife was a lady, and a rich one to boot, society looked but coldly upon her; for in India, even more than in England, class distinctions have their weight.

With this in mind, it was some time before Mrs. Felton could summon courage to ask Miss Boyd's assistance in the matter of lessons for Chrissie. She had, however, written to Juliet, making her request on the day before the brown baby's advent in the captain's bungalow, and the letter was warmly discussed by Mrs. Boyd and Juliet.

"But, Emily, Mrs. Felton offers to pay well; and just think what a boon the money would be, with Gwen and Jessie wanting frocks and shoes, and I know not what besides!" Juliet implored tearfully, reading nothing but haughty resentment on the face of her sister-in-law, as that lady perused Mrs. Felton's letter.

"I can't help it, Juliet. And if they wanted bread even, I think I should still say the same. We have our position to maintain, and must do it at whatever sacrifice to personal comfort. It would not be fitting for you to teach Captain Felton's daughter,—you, the sister of his superior officer."

Juliet sighed. A more aggressive nature might

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have made a stronger resistance, but she was meek and easily repressed. And Mrs. Boyd continued:

"You must remember, too, that Captain Felton is a ranker, and however nice his wife may be, she is not to be received as an equal. Indeed, I regard this letter in the light of an impertinence, although I dare say she did not intend it as such."

"Oh, no, I am sure she did not!" murmured Juliet distressfully.

"You had better write a civil note declining the proposal; or shall I?" went on Mrs. Boyd, holding her head more erect, and looking haughtier than ever.

"I will write, I would rather," Juliet said hastily; then hurried from the room to hide the disappointment Mrs. Boyd's decision had caused her.

In the school-room Gwen and Jessie were wrangling as usual, and, strangely enough, here also Chrissie Felton was the subject.

"I wish mother would let us know her," complained Jessie in a peevish tone, "for she has no end of pocket-money, and likes nothing better than to make presents to her friends."

"What a greedy thing you are, always thinking and talking of what you can get to eat, or suck, or chew!" retorted Gwen with an air of disgust. She was proud and haughty like her mother, giving herself airs, and posing as a person of importance already, never by any chance forgetting that the blood of an earl meandered through her veins, or that her father might inherit a title some day, although just at the present that possibility was extremely remote.

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"If I am greedy, I can't help it. I didn't make myself," growled Jessie, as she set a long-division sum on her slate, and prepared to work it.

"Dr. Perry's aunt says that Captain Felton's father is only a bailiff, or a blacksmith, or something," Gwen said, turning over the leaves of a battered French grammar.

"I don't care. What would it matter to us what her grandfather was, when we were talking to Chrissie?" objected Jessie, sighing dolefully at the hardness of the sum.

"A great deal. Do you remember who we are?" demanded Gwen, looking as much like her mother as possible, and fairly swelling with importance.

"You never give me a chance to forget it," groaned Jessie, adding in a petulant tone, "but do be quiet, Gwen, or I shall never get this sum done, and then Aunt Juliet will be so angry."

"I'll go and practise, you will have the place to yourself then," said Gwen, springing up, and flinging the grammar down with a bang.

But a visitor was in the drawing-room, and the practising had to wait, a state of affairs by no means displeasing to Gwen, who had no especial love for work of any kind.

The visitor was Miss Ferrars, the doctor's aunt, and she was telling Mrs. Boyd of a hastily-planned journey she was taking to Bombay, but broke off suddenly to ask with a chuckle if the major's wife had heard of Captain Felton's guests.

"No, I have not," replied that lady.

"Ah! then I must tell you," said Miss Ferrars. "The captain's servant came round for the doctor

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in a tremendous hurry this morning. It was quite early and before the rain stopped, but Reginald had gone to see a patient at the Ganpat Bazaar, and I sent the captain's man round there after him, for the fellow said that Mrs. Felton was very ill, and help was required at once. Reginald went off at the top of his speed, only to find when he got there —now, what do you suppose, Mrs. Boyd?"

"Indeed, I cannot tell!" retorted that lady with an air of indifference which, however, was more assumed than real.

"Why, that it was not Mrs. Felton who was ill, but a miserable little black baby that Chrissie had found outside in the road and taken in and put in her own bed;" and Miss Ferrars went off into another burst of chuckling amusement.

"How disgusting!" exclaimed Mrs. Boyd.

"I suppose I should have thought so if I had been in Mrs. Felton's place; but Reginald says she took it like an angel after he had assured her that there was no infection to be afraid of on that little minx Chrissie's account."

"And is the child still there at the captain's house?" asked Mrs. Boyd.

"Of course, the poor thing was too sick to be moved; its mother is with it, and its father too, I believe. They are hill people, the doctor says, from Beshawur. I am going to see Mrs. Felton now, to wish her joy of her guests," said Miss Ferrars, rising to take her leave.

"This is good-bye, I suppose, until you return to Rampoostan?" said the major's wife, rising also.

"Yes, I shall hardly find time to come in again, I

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fear, there is so much to be done, and so little time to do it in," replied Miss Ferrars, and, shaking hands with Mrs. Boyd, departed to make her next call.

CHAPTER III.

THE TELEGRAM.

MRS. BOYD was in the school-room giving Juliet and her daughters her own version of Chrissie Felton's experiment in charity, when the major entered hastily with a troubled face, and an open telegram in his hand.

"My dear," he said kindly as he gave the paper to his wife, "it is a summons to England; do you think you can go?"

Mrs. Boyd took the paper with trembling fingers and read—

Come by next boat, your father is worse and urges your return.

"The next boat? Why, I couldn't do it if I started this very minute!" exclaimed Mrs. Boyd in dire perplexity and distress. Her father had long been ailing, and had extorted from all his children the promise that they would endeavour to be present at his dying bed if by any means possible they could do so. He had even gone further than the extortion of this promise, and inserted a clause in his will to the effect, that any of the children who failed to honour this wish should be disinherited,

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unless it could be proved that actual physical inability was the cause of their absence.

Mrs. Boyd was well aware of this, and knew that unless she started for England at once it was probable she would forfeit the five thousand pounds that was to come to her at her father's death.

But how was it possible in their impoverished condition to raise the necessary funds for the journey? That was the problem which the husband and wife had to solve as they stood facing each other in the shabby school-room, whilst the eager, curious children pressed them with excited questions.

"Will you take us too, mother, all of us, and shall we live in England always if grandfather dies?" It was Gwen who spoke, her black eyes sparkling at visions of life in England, and the stir and change in which all young folks delight.

But the mother's reply brought blank and bitter disappointment to her, even forcing up a few tears to soften and dim her hard black eyes.

"No, I shall go alone, if go I must, for we have no money to waste in unnecessary expenses. And now, Gwen, run away to the drawing-room and practise; and, Jessie, take your violin to my bedroom, the piano will not disturb you there."

Having thus cleared the room of her two prying and inquisitive daughters, Mrs. Boyd proceeded to discuss the question of ways and means with her husband and Juliet.

"If we had been at Mahagranpat, I might have raised four or five hundred pounds upon my personal security," said the major, commencing to pace

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the room in a restless, troubled fashion. He was a brave man, and a good soldier, but this constant fret of poverty was more than be knew how to endure with patience or fortitude.

"Why not ask Sir Wyndham for it?" suggested Mrs. Boyd, though not very hopefully, previous applications of a similar character not having been attended with encouraging results.

"No use; no use at all: besides, he is in England, and there would be the expense of sending a telegram, with perhaps only a refusal after all," replied the major, while Juliet said nothing. She often made a third in the discussion of ways and means, but rarely took more than a silent part.

"There is one way in which I could get the money," said Mrs. Boyd, but with considerable hesitation.

"How?" The major's face brightened visibly as he put the question. He had great faith in his wife's shrewdness, and was always prepared to take her advice on financial matters.

"Get a loan from Lal Musjid; it could be paid when I reach England," answered Mrs. Boyd, though with something akin to a grimace, as if the plan she proposed was anything but pleasant to her.

"But the security? He would not lend much on a man's bare word of honour," the major retorted dubiously.

"There is the furniture—surely that would be security enough for the six or seven weeks that we should need the loan;" and Mrs. Boyd tapped her foot impatiently on the floor, as though anxious to get the matter settled with as little delay as possible.

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"Oh, Emily, suppose you could not repay it when you expected! That dreadful old man would seize everything; remember how he treated Captain Carter," expostulated Juliet in a frightened tone.

"But we should be able to repay it. If my father rallies I can borrow the money from him, and if, poor man, he dies, or is dead by the time I reach England, why, of course, repayment will be easy enough," returned Mrs. Boyd, with more optimism than, perhaps, the prospect warranted.

Juliet said no more, though she had grave doubts as to the wisdom of applying to Lal Musjid. There was a story current in Rampoostan of how the astute native usurer had foreclosed on Captain Carter, though he knew well the captain could have repaid the loan in full if only he had been given a week or two of grace. But Lal Musjid would not wait a day longer than the law required, and swooped down on the unfortunate debtor, stripping the house of every movable article it contained.

For some time after, Captain Carter's disaster served as an object-lesson and a warning to would-be clients, and that part of Lal Musjid's business suffered in consequence. But people are quick to forget such things when it suits their purpose or their pockets, and gradually they were returning to their former practices of obtaining loans from the old native, and paying him sixty or seventy per cent for the accommodation.

Shortly before sundown that evening, Lal Musjid appeared in answer to a summons sent to him by Mrs. Boyd, who was already plunged in preparations for immediate departure.

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Juliet shivered with a chill premonition of evil days to come, when the old man crept about the house, treading stealthily like a tiger about to spring, salaaming with sickening servility, whilst his keen glances took in everything, from the torn punkah-frill, to faulty places in the chicks and jaffreys.

But he advanced the money, and that, for the present, was all that Mrs. Boyd thought or cared about. She grumbled a little at the shortness of the time for which it was lent, seven weeks and two days—just sufficient time for her to reach England and send the money by the return mail, but on this point Lal Musjid was inflexible, and she had to give way, trusting to chance that there might be no delays in her journeying, or in raising the money for repayment when she reached her home.

Despite her disappointment in not going to England, Gwen bore the parting with her mother much better than the softer-natured Jessie, who wept bitterly, sobbing out in broken incoherent sentences that she would never see her mother again, and that she was sure some accident would happen to render her motherless, until Mrs. Boyd, who already was unhinged and hysterical from the parting with baby Wyn—best loved of all her children—broke down altogether, and mingled her tears with Jessie's.

The major was to accompany his wife to Bombay, in order to see her safely on board the steamer for England; and Miss Ferrars had arranged her journey for the same time, so that quite a large party was gathered at the station next morning to see the travellers start, and wish them *bon voyage*.

Juliet held the weeping Jessie by one hand, and

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Gwen by the other, quieting them both by her courage and hopefulness, and doing her best to soothe the grief of Mrs. Boyd.

The fair was over, and the throng of departing merchants, pilgrims, buyers, and sellers was very great.

For the past twelve hours the exodus had been going on, but the stream of travellers showed little sign of abatement. Pushing and crowding, the tide of unwashed but well-greased humanity swept along, filling the hot air with almost unbearable odours as they passed.

And despite the recent heavy storm, it was hotter than ever. A shimmer of heat hung over the plain, with a dull glare of bleared sunshine, which the earth reflected back with an added intensity of suffocating warmth.

It was an atmosphere hardly to be endured without fainting, and Juliet was thankful when the last good-byes were said, and the labouring engines drew the heavily-laden train from the still-crowded platform.

Rampoostan was the terminus of the line, and the station, a very poor affair, boasted but one platform, which was crowded with many things not pertaining to railway travelling. Little shrines to various deities, where the faithful might place their offerings; a small image of Kartikeya, the god of war; and at the far end of the strip of sun-baked pavement a heap of stones arranged in a pyramid, and stuck all over with little flags to drive away the spirits of evil which might be induced to come about the place, drawn thither by curiosity to see

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the steam god, which rushed with such terrific speed over the lines of shining rail.

Captain Felton had come down to the station to see his superior officer start, and stayed to speak to Juliet and her nieces, as the trio slowly wended their way out past the bamboo screen which divided the ticket-office from the other part of the premises.

He was a man of commanding appearance and fine military carriage. No one, to look at him, would have supposed that he had sprung from the ranks, yet so it was; and to do him justice, Captain Felton was not ashamed, but rather proud of the extent and rapidity of his rise, and totally failed to understand why Mrs. Boyd regarded him with so much coolness and disdain.

"Good-morning, Miss Boyd! You will be feeling quite lonely with half your household gone," he said with a pleasant smile of greeting.

Gwen's head went up with a fling, in imitation of her mother, and Jessie looked the other way; but Juliet, stung to a greater cordiality by the rudeness of her nieces, held out her hand with an impulsive gesture. "Good-morning, Captain Felton! You are quite right; we shall feel quite lonely at first, I expect, with Mrs. Boyd away. But my brother will be back soon, and then the blank will not seem so bad."

"Have you heard of the distinguished visitors I have the honour of entertaining just now?" he asked with a twinkle of amusement in his eyes, for he thought that Juliet was proud and disdainful like her sister-in-law, and felt a mischievous desire to shock her.

"Miss Ferrars said that you had a black baby

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there," she replied a little dubiously, not sure whether it was to this kind of visitor the captain was alluding.

"What a base calumny to call the young gentleman black!" laughed the captain. "He is not black at all, but a rich warm brown; and Mrs. Musef, his mother, has been quite a belle in her time, I should say. His father is at the house too, you know, and a particularly fine goat that is the despair of Ford's life, because of the ease with which it scrambles over the wall into the compound, and works havoc in the flower-beds."

"It was very kind of Mrs. Felton to take them in," murmured Juliet, feeling that she would like to shake those two nieces of hers for their sullen silence and cold aloofness.

"I don't think that my wife deserves the most credit in the affair, indeed I'm all but sure that national prejudice, and all that sort of thing, would have kept her from the offer of hospitality, but Chrissie did not give her a chance in the matter; and once the thing was done, there was nothing left but to make the best of it."

"Is the child very ill?" Juliet asked.

"No, he is much better, and on the high-road to recovery. Dr. Perry says that he will be fit for moving in a few days, and then we shall lose our guests. But you ought to see them all, Miss Boyd. Come in and have a cup of tea this afternoon with Mrs. Felton, and bring these young ladies with you," said the captain in his genial, pleasant manner, never dreaming how obnoxious he was to Mrs. Boyd's two young daughters.

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Juliet was embarrassed at this invitation, and the prompt decision it entailed, and a stolen glance at Gwen's scowl, and Jessie's sneering face, did not help her much. But her own good sense came to the rescue, bidding her accept the kindness in the spirit in which it was offered. "Thank you, Captain Felton. It was in my mind to call on Mrs. Felton in the course of a day or two, but if you are likely soon to lose those unusual guests of yours, I might as well come to-day, and have a peep at them before they go."

"Very well, I will tell my wife to expect you. Good-morning, ladies!" and away strode the captain, leaving Juliet to combat the angry objections of Gwen as best she could.

"Aunt Juliet, what were you thinking about to accept that odious man's invitation? Mother would be ready to eat you nearly if she were at home," cried Gwen, whose indignation was too great to admit of elegance of expression.

"You'll take me, won't you, Aunt Juliet? They are sure to have a nicer tea than ours," put in Jessie in such an energetic tone that Juliet laughed in spite of herself, but Gwen kindled into fiercer wrath.

"You greedy, horrid thing, Jessie! You don't care where you go, or what you do, if only you can get something nice to eat. I believe you would take supper with Lal Musjid himself, if only the bill of fare was sufficiently inviting."

"I believe I would, if he'd offer to give me macaroons and pink cream, or apricot soufflé," retorted Jessie, quite ready and willing for the impending quarrel.

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But Juliet's quiet voice interposed, and stayed the storm. "I shall not take either of you; your mother does not visit at Mrs. Felton's, and therefore I could not permit you to go, but for me of course it is a different matter."

"Mother wouldn't like you to go either if she knew," said Gwen in a mutinous tone, which Juliet forebore to reprove, because of a certain uneasy consciousness concerning the truth of the statement.

But these mental qualms were wholly forgotten when, later in the day, she found herself in the daintily pretty drawing-room of the captain's bungalow.

Mrs. Felton was a little, fragile woman, who looked as though an extra vigorous puff of wind would blow her away. She was a great sufferer too, the victim of a disease that sooner or later would end her existence. But she was a charming companion notwithstanding, and Juliet was speedily beguiled into feeling at ease, and almost happy in her society, despite the heavy burden of care weighing upon her.

Chrissie led the visitor in triumph to the pink-and-white chamber, where Narudu was happily recovering from his sickness, and exhibited him with almost as much pride of proprietorship as Musef herself might have displayed in her brown baby.

"Isn't he a darling, Miss Boyd? Ah, how I wish I could keep him always!" she cried, as she stood with clasped hands before the bed, just as a devout heathen might stand before the particular deity he worshipped.

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"You would get tired of him, I am afraid, Chrissie; babies are apt to pall on one after a time," Juliet replied; and the little girl turned on her with a shocked face, asking in a surprised tone:

"Do you get tired of that beautiful baby at your house, Miss Boyd?"

"I have never had that sensation with regard to Wyn, because he is such a healthy, contented child. But sickly babies are apt to be a terrible trial at times. Still, even Wyn is a great responsibility, now that his mother is away, for she is so devoted to him that I am always worrying lest anything should happen to him whilst she is absent."

"Poor Miss Boyd," said the young Samaritan sympathetically, as she bent over and bestowed another kiss on the brown baby's face, "I can quite understand how you feel. I should be just like it myself, if Musef were to go back to Beshawur and leave me in charge of Narudu."

At this Juliet laughed, thinking how little Mrs. Boyd would relish being compared with the brown mother from Beshawur, even in such a thing as sentiment.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LOOTING OF ALIPAHR.

A WEEK of intensely hot weather followed, in which exertion was impossible, and bare existence a burden almost too great to be borne.

Gwen and Jessie drooped like wilted flowers, and

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even baby Wyn grew pale and languid, turning peevishly away from his food, and disregarding the india-rubber donkey, which was his dearest, best-beloved plaything.

Letters from Bombay had announced the sailing of Mrs. Boyd, and mentioned also the probability of the major staying in the city for another week, or even a fortnight.

Juliet was much surprised at the latter information; she had expected that her brother would return at once, and secretly she was very anxious to have him back again; for Gwen and Jessie were proving restive under her rule, gentle and kind though it was, and she longed for the steadier, firmer discipline of their father to be brought to bear upon them.

Gwen threw up all her studies, except music, whilst Jessie did nothing at all, unless her persistent defiance of her aunt might be regarded as action.

At the end of the week the weather broke with a storm of such awful severity that both girls were cowed into good behaviour by fear, clinging to their aunt in a panic of terror, believing that the end of the world had come, and desiring to have her forgiveness before the final destruction overwhelmed them.

But the lightning ceased its play, and the crashing thunder died to a sullen intermittent roar, as it had done before; only the rain descended in sheets, as if the fountains of the great deep had broken up, and for more than a week Juliet and her charges were close prisoners within the four walls of the bungalow.

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Shut up thus, they heard nothing of the ugly rumours gaining circulation in Rampoostan of an insurrection among the hill tribes, with the usual accompaniments of pillage and murder.

Rampoostan was a survey centre, the military going and coming constantly from the town to the outpost stations, some of them many miles away. Captain Felton had started on one of these expeditions two days before the rains began, and on the evening of the ninth day he returned, expecting to find the major home before him, and greatly surprised to learn that he was still absent.

Indeed, there happened to be an unusual dearth of officers in the place just then, one or two being on sick leave, and others away on duty. The colonel had gone with his wife to Simla, and there was no one in the place at the moment to assume authority, except Captain Felton and young Lieutenant Benson, who, in point of years and discretion, was little better than a boy.

This would not have mattered at any ordinary time, but it so chanced that Captain Felton and his men had not been in the town for more than two hours when a telegram was received from Chunderbah, which filled them all with alarm and consternation.

A body of armed Kajids had swooped down upon Alipahr, killing an officer and two privates, besides wounding the doctor and carrying off many valuable stores, with arms and ammunition. Alipahr was one of the most distant of the outpost stations, a town and fort standing on the border of Kajid territory, and about eighty miles distant from

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Rampoostan. Chunderbah, whence the telegram had been sent, was nearly midway between the two towns. The telegraphic communication did not extend further than Chunderbah, the news of the attack having been brought there from Alipahr by native runners and wired on to Rampoostan.

Captain Felton was in a state of dire perplexity. Some aid must be sent on to Alipahr without delay, for plainly the situation there was critical, and every day might make it more so. But it was rather a serious business to act without orders; and after some consultation with his wife, Captain Felton went off to the Boyd bungalow to learn whether any tidings had been received of the major's probable return.

Juliet came to him in the drawing-room that had been so rarely used since Mrs. Boyd's departure. She was pale and worn, and had an anxious look upon her face. The captain supposed this to be due to the extra care and responsibility that had come to her through the absence of her brother, but in reality it was owing to the relentless dunning of some of the native tradesmen, who were afraid of losing their money, and worried the poor mem-sahib beyond endurance, in their daily reminders of her obligations, and the desirability of speedily clearing them off.

"Can you tell me when the major will return, Miss Boyd?" asked the captain, standing erect and soldier-like amongst the bewildering chaos of curios and nick-nacks with which it had pleased Mrs. Boyd to bestrew her reception-room.

Juliet shook her head with a troubled air.

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"I had a letter from him three days ago, but he did not mention the matter. I thought it a little surprising then, but supposed it might be business of some sort that was causing the delay. Is anything the matter, Captain Felton?"

"I am afraid so," he answered gravely, resolving to explain the situation to her, that she might be able to intercede for him with the major, if he should be called to book for acting without orders.

"What is it?—Insurrection?" she asked, that being the usual reason for trouble or worry in the life of the white man on the frontier.

"Not exactly; it looks more like invasion. Those Kajids have always been unpleasant neighbours, and now they seem to be taken with a strong desire to increase their territory," he answered, going on to tell her of the descent on Alipahr, and the disastrous results of the attack.

"What will you do?" she asked, her face growing a little paler, for the fourscore miles between Rampoostan and this fierce and cruel foe seemed but a pitifully slight barrier.

"They have telegraphed for reinforcements from Chunderbah. Help ought to be sent off at once, and that is where my perplexity comes in. If I go and take a company with me, the major may be angry with me for acting without orders. But if, on the other hand, I do not go, and we lose Alipahr and the lives of the garrison yet remaining, all England will be ready to cry shame on us for the delay."

"And you can save the garrison by going?" she asked, coming a step nearer to him in her excite-

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ment, her eyes lighting up and her cheeks flushing.

"I do not know. They should be able to hold out for a few days against any ordinary attack," he replied, but gravely still, knowing more than he cared to tell her of the weakness of Alipahr's defences and the strength and cunning of the force arrayed against it.

"Then go—go at once if there is the faintest hope or chance of saving life. My brother is not unreasonable, and I will tell him how it was you had to go. Oh, trust me, Captain Felton! I will take the blame!" she exclaimed, eager that he should start without a moment's loss of time.

"Will you?" he said with a short laugh of amusement. "It is very kind of you, Miss Boyd. I am only afraid that a court-martial would scarcely look on you as competent to take such a big responsibility on your shoulders. But I will go, and leave you to make my peace with Major Boyd when he returns."

"Couldn't you telegraph to him to hurry back?" Juliet asked, following the captain to the door.

"I ran down to the office directly I had this message, in order to wire it on, but they told me something was wrong with the service, and they could send no messages at all—some breakdown owing to the rain, I think. However, a few days will doubtless remedy that," replied the captain; and he hurried away to make preparations for the start, whilst Juliet turned back into the house.

Gwen was waiting for her, with a white face and staring eyes. "Oh, Aunt Juliet, what shall we do? We shall all be killed—I know we shall!" she cried,

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casting herself upon her aunt in a wild abandonment of grief.

"It is not we who are in danger, Gwen, but those poor men who are shut up in the fort at Alipahr," Juliet answered.

"I am so frightened!" moaned Gwen, hiding her head on her aunt's shoulder and shivering violently.

"You should not have listened outside the door, then you would have escaped the fright. As it is, you can only look upon it as a punishment for your mean, dishonourable eavesdropping," Juliet answered brusquely.

But Gwen only shivered the more, and clung yet more closely to her aunt. "I listened once before," she whispered. "It was when Colonel Quincey was in here with father, one day, and I heard him say that Alipahr was the key of the position. Once let the border tribes seize on that, and they would sweep the whole country this side of the river."

It was Juliet's turn to shiver now, for the words carried conviction with them. Besides, during her six months' residence in Rampoostan she had heard and seen quite enough of the fierce animosity of the border tribes to fully realize the critical nature of the situation.

"If only your father were at home!" she exclaimed, a feeling of terrible helplessness stealing over her.

"I am glad he isn't. If he were, he would be rushing off to Alipahr with Captain Felton and the others; and then he would perhaps be killed or wounded," replied Gwen with the selfishness of the young.

"Hush, Gwen, don't talk like that! A soldier's

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duty is to fight for his country; and if he dies in defending it, he is a hero," cried Juliet with enthusiasm.

"I'd rather have a live father than a dead hero," grumbled Gwen, and then collapsed on to the floor in a great burst of weeping.

Juliet tried to comfort her, but in vain, and finding at last that all her efforts were ineffectual, she left her, and went to look after Jessie and baby Wyn.

Jessie was down in the cook-house, instructing the black cook in the mysteries of toffee-making, her face, hands, and frock all besmeared and grimy. But at least she was happy and occupied, and Juliet turned away thankfully enough; then, peeping into the nursery and finding little Wyn asleep, with his ayah watching beside him, she went back to the drawing-room to Gwen.

"Aunt Juliet, has Captain Felton started yet, do you think?" Gwen demanded, when she had wept all the tears she had to shed, and was sitting in the middle of the floor with her chin resting on her knees, a dismal and pathetic figure.

"I think so, dear. I heard the bugles as I came back from the cook-house," replied Juliet, with a chill apprehension creeping over her as to the fate the brave little band of volunteers might be going to meet.

"Shall we run in and see Mrs. Felton, Aunt Juliet; it must be dreadful for her and Chrissie?"

Julia started at this suggestion, coming as it did from the proud and intolerant Gwen; but she was too wise to comment on it further than by saying, "Yes, it will be a kind thing to do. Get a hat,

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Gwen dear, but don't disturb Jessie; she is in the cook-house making toffee, and with never a thought of anything wrong to trouble her."

Gwen nodded her head in token of assent and rushed away, reappearing two minutes later, swathed in a long white mackintosh, the hood being drawn over her head, and imparting a peculiar and ghost-like appearance to her figure.

They went out to the front verandah, across the compound, and into the road. It had ceased to rain about half an hour before, but the steamy vapour rising from the sun-scorched earth hung in a heavy mist like an English fog.

Picking their way along the muddy edge of the road, which the rain had for the nonce transformed into a roaring water-course, they entered the compound of the captain's house, and were approaching the door, when Chrissie came flying out to meet them.

"Oh, Miss Boyd, do you know that father has gone, and a whole troop of men with him?" she cried, seizing upon Juliet with both hands.

"Yes, I heard the bugles, and Gwen and I came round to comfort you and your mother. Is she in her room, and may I go to her?"

"Mother is crying dreadfully, and she won't let me be with her; but perhaps if you were to walk in without knocking, Miss Boyd, she would let you comfort her," replied Chrissie, looking up into Juliet's face with pathetic wistfulness.

Juliet hesitated. Her acquaintance with Mrs. Felton did not seem intimate enough to warrant an intrusion of this kind; but she could not withstand

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the pleading of Chrissie's eyes, so, taking her courage in both hands, she stepped across the passage-way that cut the house in two, and, turning the handle of the door, entered Mrs. Felton's darkened chamber.

So dim was the light that for a moment she stood still, unable to distinguish objects in the gloom. Then low, murmuring sobs struck on her ear, and stepping softly across the intervening space, Juliet knelt down beside the bamboo lounge on which Mrs. Felton was lying, and gently touched the poor lady's arm.

"Run away, Chrissie dear; I told you not to come," Mrs. Felton said, controlling her voice by a great effort, although in the end it trailed off in a moan of acute pain.

"It is not Chrissie—it is I, Juliet Boyd, dear Mrs. Felton; and I have come to tell you how sorry we are for your trouble," Juliet murmured in a trembling tone.

Mrs. Felton stirred on her couch, opening her eyes in surprise. "My trouble! how did you know it?"

"Captain Felton came to see if the major had returned, and told me of the trouble at Alipahr. And I—I urged him to go without delay," faltered Juliet, wondering why the lady looked so strange.

Mrs. Felton heaved a deep sigh of relief, and struggled feebly to a sitting posture. "Put another pillow behind me, please," she whispered faintly, and Juliet was shocked to see how haggard and drawn her face was.

"I shall be better in a minute or two; stay with me, will you, please, dear Miss Boyd," she gasped; and for answer Juliet drew the two hands in a

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strong, firm clasp and waited silently, though it wrung her heart to see how cruel the suffering was that racked the poor invalid.

It was half an hour or more before Mrs. Felton was sufficiently recovered to speak above a whisper, and then she said with a wan smile, "That is over once more, I am thankful to say."

"It is dreadful. Do you often suffer like that?" Juliet asked in a shocked voice.

"Very often. Always after any excitement, whether joyful or sorrowful. But I do not like it to be known. I never allow Chrissie near me when I am ill like this, I could not have the child's life saddened in such a manner; and I have done my best to guard the knowledge from the outside world, but you found me out in spite of my precautions," she answered a little reproachfully.

Juliet hastened to apologize. "I would not have ventured to intrude, dear Mrs. Felton, but Chrissie begged so hard that I would promise to walk in without knocking, and so I came, never dreaming that I should find anything worse than grief at the captain's departure."

"Is it not terrible that he should have to go to the front like this?" said the poor wife with a shiver, "and yet it is only the average chance of a soldier's life, and I would bear it bravely enough if it were only myself in the question; for the bullets may miss their billet, and my soldier may come to his home again, or if he should fall, the shock of the tidings would snap my brittle thread of suffering existence, and I should be at peace. But there is Chrissie!"

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Ah, yes! that was where the fiercest of the mother's pangs came in. Little did she heed her own pain and trouble; it was Chrissie for whom she suffered most.

"But the danger—to you—is not imminent?" Juliet asked, the question forced from her almost against her will it seemed, though she shrank from anything that might look like a desire to force the invalid's confidence.

"I don't know. The Bombay physician said no, and Dr. Perry says the same, only warning me against any continued excitement. But, after all, doctors are not infallible, and I know that every attack leaves me with less strength to face the next."

Juliet sat silent. No words of comfort that she could utter would serve to soothe a grief like this.

"It was this trouble of mine that made me venture to ask you to take Chrissie's music in hand for me," Mrs. Felton went on presently. Her voice was stronger now, she was recovering from the fierce attack of pain, and only the worn, haggard look on her face betrayed how dire the anguish had been. "I felt that the culture would be good for her in more ways than one: it would occupy her, take her out of herself, and be an all-round benefit to her."

Juliet murmured an incoherent something in reply, and a feeling akin to defiance of Mrs. Boyd took possession of her, as she realized what it must have cost Mrs. Felton to make the request—and to have it refused.

"You will come to see me sometimes, now that

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you know?" Mrs. Felton asked, her eyes wistful, and with a pathos in their yearning depths that made her look like Chrissie.

"I shall come in every day," burst out Juliet impulsively—her revolt against her sister-in-law was taking tangible shape and form—"and if you will permit me, I will look after Chrissie's music too, only I can't take money for it, because Mrs. Boyd would not like it."

"Forgive me that I ever asked you to do it," said Mrs. Felton apologetically.

"Oh, I should have been very thankful to have taken the money, as I don't share the family prejudice against wage-earning! But one cannot live to one's self in this world, you know, and if you will please allow me to do it, I'll teach Chrissie out of pure love of art."

"As you will. I should be your debtor in any case," returned Mrs. Felton.

And so the compact was sealed.

CHAPTER V.

ANXIOUS DAYS.

THAT night, by the last train, Major Boyd returned to Rampoostan. It had begun to rain again, a high wind sending the drops in sheets against the frail houses, which had been built more as a protection from the fierce heat of the sun than as a shelter from the fury of the storm, and the

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draughts had it all their own way as they swept in laden with the damp of the outside world.

The major had heard the news at the station, and came walking into the house, where Juliet was sitting wrapped in a big shawl, wearing a grave face and a very troubled aspect.

"What is all this fuss about Alipahr?" he burst out, without staying for any formality of greeting.

She told him all she knew, and how Captain Felton had gone with a small troop in response to the call for assistance.

"How many men are left in quarters?" demanded the major, seizing the bell-rope, and ringing it so violently that the frail thing came away in his hand.

"I don't know," she replied, wondering if he was angry that the troop had gone, or only concerned at the delay in his own return.

"Send down to the quarters, and request the officer on duty to wait upon me at once," was his order, given in the curtest, most dictatorial tone, and which caused Juliet to shiver apprehensively.

The servant salaamed and withdrew, and the major was turning away to his own room when Juliet ventured a word of timid inquiry.

"You are not angry because the men went without orders?"

"Angry?" he paused, looking at her in amazement that she should put such a question, or think the thoughts which prompted it; "Good God, no! My anger is all turned upon myself that I was not back sooner in order to have gone with them."

"You can follow to-morrow," she answered soothingly.

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"I hope to be in the saddle half an hour from this," he retorted in a sharp tone; "and if I can only get a change of horse at Jam Bahangar's plantation, I should be at Chunderbah by dawn in time to catch up the troop."

"But you are worn already with travelling, dear Philip, wait until to-morrow," she urged, not a little troubled by his manner, and the wildness of his eyes.

"I can't wait. If those Kajid wretches succeed in wresting Alipahr from us, who shall say where they will stop? But I should like to kiss the children before I go. Are they all in bed?"

"Yes, it is so late, you know, almost midnight. Shall I wake the girls, or will you go to them in their room?"

"I will go to them. Come with me, Juliet, will you? but don't rouse them if you can help it. If they were to cry out at my going I couldn't stand it," he answered, his voice shaken by strong emotion.

Taking up a lamp, Juliet silently led the way to the chamber where Gwen and Jessie were sleeping, the major following close behind, while the wind moaned and shrieked round the house, and the flame of the lamp flared and flickered in the strong draught.

Both girls were asleep, their long black hair streaming across the pillows, and the lids drooped over the eyes that looked so hard and unsympathetic by day.

For a minute or two the soldier hung over them in yearning silence, then, dropping a light kiss on either quiet face, he turned hastily from the bed.

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"Where is Wyn?" he asked in a hoarse whisper; and Juliet turned out of that room into her own, where the infant's cot stood close to her bed.

He also was asleep, one hand tightly clutching a favourite toy, the other flung carelessly across the coverlet. He stirred, frowned, and uttered a little whimpering cry when his father's moustache brushed his cheek, but Juliet's hand fell in gentle soothing pats on his plump shoulder, while she softly crooned a word or two of a familiar lullaby, and the baby face smoothed itself free from puckers, and with a queer little grunt of satisfaction Master Wyndham was sound asleep again.

The major turned away in the same hurried manner as he had done from his daughters' bed.

"Poor things, they are all so young to be left!" he said in a low, strained voice as he went with Juliet to the dining-room, where a hastily-prepared supper had been laid for him.

"But you may come unharmed through this," she expostulated, thinking of Mrs. Felton, whose sorrow was so near akin to the major's.

"I hope not. Better for them, better for me that I should fall now. Emily would get the pension, and my uncle might help her, out of pity," he said, sitting down to the table, and taking food on his plate, yet not attempting to eat.

"Philip, what do you mean?" cried Juliet in a tone of consternation.

"Do you remember our father's great trouble in the months before he died?" asked the major, leaning his arms on the table, and bowing his face upon them.

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"Do you mean about his eyes?"

A motion of the major's hand in sign of assent, and Juliet gave an involuntary cry of dismay.

"That is why my return has been delayed so long. I waited for a consultation. Dr. Strutz-Weimar thought at first there might be the shadow of a chance that an operation would save the sight of at least one eye, but when they met to consult, their decision was against me. And if I live there is nothing for it but to send in my papers when this Alipahr business is settled, and face the future as best I can."

"But they may be mistaken. Surely in England there are more skilful men who would be able to do something for you. Why, you are quite young yet. Our father was much older, you know," she said, in trying to assure herself that the Bombay oculists had blundered.

"It is the glare of the sun that has done it, they say. If I had lived the life my father did, I might have seen for another twenty years. Talk of India being fatal to a man's liver! I should say it works much greater havoc with his eyes," replied the major bitterly.

"The Sahib Benson do be arrive," announced the black servant, appearing for a moment on the threshold, and then stepping aside to usher in Lieutenant Benson, who had come in answer to the summons of his superior officer.

Juliet slipped out, leaving the two men together, and, groping her way to the dark drawing-room, sat down on a chair, trying to realize all that this new trouble might portend.

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But she could not think coherently as yet, and sat still in the dark, whilst a chaotic whirl of fancies, fears, and terrible apprehensions ran riot in her brain.

Then she heard the trampling of horses' feet before the door, and knew that the farewell was close at hand.

Running back to the dining-room, she found Lieutenant Benson still talking with her brother, who was buckling on his sword, and looking to his accoutrements.

"The horses have come," she panted. "Oh, Philip, do let me bring the girls to say good-bye; they will never forgive me that I did not wake them!"

"Better not," he answered laconically, to hide the storm of fatherly love and longing that was raising such a mighty commotion in his breast.

Juliet was silenced, but not convinced, as she followed the major to the door.

"See here," he said, turning round and holding up his finger with an impressive air, "if this business at Alipahr turns out more serious than is expected, don't stay here with the children, Juliet, but get away with them to Bombay—or the nearest place of safety that you can."

"Do you think matters are so serious, sir? Why, it seems only like a storm in a tea-cup," broke in Lieutenant Benson.

"In this country any outbreak may be serious, however simple and easy to quell it may appear at first. It's like dropping a spark among dried fern, the spark is not very big, but the blaze resulting

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from it may be a huge conflagration if you don't take care," remarked the major sententiously. Then bidding Juliet good-bye, and reiterating his desire that she should remove the children to a safer place if danger threatened, he sprang to his saddle, and rode away into the wild, wet darkness of the night, accompanied only by an orderly.

She remained in the doorway watching until the last sound of horses' hoofs died away; then, going back into the house, she shut the door, and prepared to keep vigil until morning.

They were anxious days that followed, and the little company of white people left in Rampoostan drew closer together in their loneliness.

At last came news from the front. Captain Felton and his troop had reached Alipahr, and joining forces with the beleaguered garrison, had beaten off the Kajids, and were about to pursue them into their own territory in order to recover some of the stores which the invaders had looted from Alipahr.

There was no mention of the major in this despatch, a circumstance which, though it rendered Juliet uneasy at first, might be accounted for by the stress and hurry of pursuit. The besieged town and fort had suffered heavily from the guns of the enemy, and all who could be spared from the actual fighting had to work at preparing the defences, for no one could tell how soon the tide of war might turn again, rendering it necessary for the military to shelter once more within the walls of the little border fort.

The anxiety of those who waited for tidings

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was not much lessened by this account; and day after day the telegraph office was besieged by inquirers clamouring to know whether any further news had come over the wires from Chunderbah.

Meanwhile a disaster occurred near Rampoostan, which was sufficiently serious to make the hearts of the white people in the town quake with fearful apprehensions of the future.

This was the collapse of the railway bridge over the river, by which the town was cut off from even postal communication with the civilized world. The accident was due to the floods. Rampoostan was near to an arm of the Sutlej, which in the dry season was a tiny water-course that a man could step over, but, when the rains began, assumed the size and importance of a full-grown river, running with a rapid current, and flooding the country through which it flowed.

For this reason Rampoostan had been built fully two miles from the river, on a swelling ridge of the plain, which, though not of sufficient elevation to be called a hill, was yet high enough to place it beyond fear of flood.

The bridge over this waterway was well made, and strong—or supposed to be; and had stood the wear and tear of five wet seasons. But the fierce current, bringing in its train huge trunks of trees torn away from the forest-covered reaches of the lower hills, flung them against the stone piers of the bridge, and so the destruction was wrought.

Gwen and Jessie brought the news to Juliet. They had been with the ayah to the telegraph office, hoping for tidings from Chunderbah, but

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came rushing back with the tale of the broken bridge instead.

"And they are saying, Aunt Juliet, that it will be six months before the repairs can be begun, and until then we are all practically prisoners on this side of the river; even the mails will have to be carried in a post-bandy right round by Chunderbah and Tarn-Tarnsauli, quite a four-days' journey," Gwen said. Her face was rather white, and her breath came in thick, short pants as if from fright.

"That won't matter so much now father has come back from Bombay," Jessie answered indifferently; then suddenly broke out into a cry that Juliet had heard so many times during the last few days, "Oh, Aunt Juliet, it was cruel not to wake us that night when he came home!" and forthwith began to sob dismally.

"Be quiet, Jessie, if you can," commanded Gwen in an impatient tone; but Jessie cried on unheeding, and Juliet's eyes filled from sympathy.

"Doesn't it make our position rather risky, Aunt Juliet?" Gwen asked, her fingers pulling nervously at her hat, damaging it considerably, though she was much too absorbed to notice this, or indeed to care about it if she had.

"It does away with the possibility of escape certainly, but there may be no need to run away, in which case our worst inconvenience will arise from having to do without many things that are absolute necessaries in our eyes at present," Juliet answered, making an effort to speak hopefully, although her heart sank very low.

Jessie's weeping had subsided to rather demon-

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strative sniffing as she sat on a stool near the window, rolling her damp handkerchief into a ball, making dabs at her red eyes with it, and then unrolling it again; but Gwen damaged her hat more actively than before, frowning the while, until her black brows almost met; but Juliet did not move or speak.

"Here comes Chrissie Felton, and she is running. What a sight she looks, tearing along like that! a regular plebeian she is, and no mistake about it," Jessie went on in a slighting tone as she watched Chrissie's approach, and never dreaming but that she would find a sympathizer in Gwen.

"Be quiet, Jessie; how horrid you can be! As if it mattered in the least whether one is plebeian or patrician now that the bridge is down, and we are at the mercy of those awful Kajid people," burst out Gwen, springing to her feet and dashing her hat to the floor.

"Hush, dear! there is no necessity for panic yet," Juliet said in a soothing tone; but she rose quickly too, and went out to meet Chrissie, whose approach did certainly display more agility than grace.

"What is it, Chrissie—is your mother worse?" she asked as the little girl came dashing along at the top of her speed.

"Mother is very well. It isn't that, Miss Boyd," panted Chrissie, who was thoroughly winded with her run.

"Is it news from Alipahr?" demanded Juliet. Though a darkness like midnight obscured her vision, and the solid earth seemed to reel beneath her feet, she felt, rather than saw, that Gwen had

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followed and stood beside her, whilst Chrissie's voice, when she spoke, seemed to come from a long way off.

"A man has come in from Chunderbah; he says the telegraph office there was burned down two days ago; but he has brought a letter from father that had been sent on from Alipahr," gasped Chrissie, breathless still, and almost incoherent in her desire to be explicit.

"And my brother—Major Boyd?" cried Juliet in a sharp tone, whilst Gwen shivered and groaned in inarticulate pain.

"It is the strangest thing where he can be, mother says, for father has asked in his letter when the major may be expected to arrive."

This was the last straw, and Juliet's endurance gave way under the strain. She heard a shriek of terror from Gwen, which was promptly caught up and echoed by Jessie, and then the thick darkness increased, engulfing and swallowing her up in its gloom, and she sank down in merciful unconsciousness.

"Chrissie Felton, Chrissie Felton, you have killed Aunt Juliet! Go away, you horrid little wretch, go away, do!" screamed Jessie, flying at Chrissie with intent to do her bodily harm.

"Don't be such a goose, Jessie, and get out of the way; she has only fainted," said Gwen in a peremptory fashion, at the same time bestowing on her sister a vigorous push.

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CHAPTER VI.

MISSING.

WHEN Juliet came to herself again, it was to find Dr. Perry bending over her with a reproachful, almost disgusted, expression on his face.

"Miss Boyd, I thought you had more judgment and discretion," he said sternly, as she began to tremble and cry with the realization of her trouble.

The disapproval of his tone was instantly beneficial, for she began forthwith to feel rather ashamed of herself.

"I am very sorry. It came upon me so suddenly," she said meekly, and, raising her head to look round, discovered, to her surprise, that she was no longer out of doors, but lying on a lounge in the drawing-room. "How did I get in here?" she demanded with a frown of annoyance.

"I carried you, with Miss Gwen's assistance, for you are rather heavy," he said in a quizzical tone, which Juliet resented at once.

"You need not have troubled," she said, trying to rise; then, seeing there were none of the girls in the room, asked in an anxious tone: "Dr. Perry, what can have happened to the major, that he has never reached Alipahr?"

"A thousand things may have happened, yet none of them need be of necessity disastrous," the doctor answered coolly enough. "His horse may have fallen lame in some village where it is im-

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possible to get another, or he may have found it necessary to make a detour, or even to lie in hiding for a few days. Because a man is missing there is no reason to jump to the conclusion that he is dead. Come, Miss Boyd, I thought you had more fortitude than to despair so easily."

"I think I should have in an ordinary way, but now—", here Juliet checked herself, not daring to tell the whole of her fears, nor the reason for them.

Dr. Perry did not heed her hesitation. He was wondering privately if she was strong enough for further revelations, and, deciding that she was, proceeded to his task of enlightenment. "They have had some rather hot work at Alipahr, and it isn't over yet. There's a call for more volunteers, and a troop are to start from Rampoostan to-night."

"But there are no more troops left in the town, at least hardly any?" she questioned, looking up at him in great surprise.

"It is the 'hardly any' that are going to-night, Miss Boyd, and I am going with them, for in times like these no able-bodied man should withhold his aid; and at this season you know how difficult it is to get reinforcements up country as quickly as they are needed."

"I know," she replied, with a quick movement of her head.

"But I am very much troubled about leaving the town just now, and I wouldn't go but for the dire necessity of the case," he went on, leaving the side of the couch where he had been standing and beginning to pace the narrow limits of the room, overturning a footstool here, knocking down a

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pyramid of dried grasses there, and generally rendering Juliet so nervous that she rose from the couch, and began to move about too, feeling that she could endure inaction no longer.

"What do you fear?" she asked.

"Cholera chiefly. The weather is hot and cold by turns, but damp all the time. Then the people are just ripe for epidemic and panic, being anxious and disturbed about the situation. All might be well if their spirits could be kept up, and that is what I wanted to talk to you about."

"What can I do?" she said in a surprised tone.

"A great deal. A woman's wit in a case of this kind is worth much more than a man's skill; only if you are going to give way as you did just now, you will be worse than useless," he replied in a hard tone, determined to put her on her mettle if possible.

"I shall not faint again. I will do my best to avert the trouble you fear," she said, holding her head erect and looking him in the face without flinching.

"Very well. I will see you again before we start. For the present, good-morning!" and with a nod of his head the doctor departed, and Juliet was left alone.

But not for long. Hardly had the sound of his footsteps died away when Gwen came softly in, with a white, frightened face, and hands that were trembling visibly.

"You are better, Aunt Juliet? Oh, I am thankful! I wanted to stay with you, but Dr. Perry hustled me off out of the room with no more cere-

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mony than if I had been a crying baby like Jessie. Do you think anything bad has happened to father?" This last question was faltered forth from quivering lips, and, looking at her, Juliet braced her own courage to begin at once her work of cheer.

"He may have been compelled to halt by the way, as Dr. Perry says, and at the same time been unable to send tidings of his whereabouts to us. And remember, dear, the danger is not this side of Alipahr, but the other," she said, and was rewarded by seeing Gwen's face a shade more hopeful.

"It is very dreadful! Poor father, how I wish he had let you wake us up that night, Aunt Juliet!" and Gwen sighed despondently.

"Has Chrissie Felton gone home yet, or is she still here?" Juliet asked, picking up the stool that the doctor had knocked over, and rearranging the grasses.

"She is in the nursery with Jessie and Wyn. She coaxed Jessie into taking her there when the doctor turned us out of the room. Shall we go and see what they are doing?"

"Yes, I want to pay Mrs. Felton a visit presently, but I feel weak and giddy just now, and I think I had better wait a little before venturing," Juliet answered.

Sounds of merriment greeted them as they reached the nursery door, whereat Gwen looked scandalized, but Juliet was relieved beyond measure. No fear of cholera here, surely, if hilarity and mirth might be reckoned as safeguards.

They found Chrissie lying spread-eagle fashion on the floor, with Baby Wyn creeping in crowing

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delight about her, pulling her nose, stuffing his fat fists in her mouth, which was open, and getting his feet and legs hopelessly entangled in her long hair, whilst Jessie lay back in a chair and laughed until she cried.

"Oh, Miss Boyd, forgive us, please, for making so much noise. Wyn was crying dismally when we came in, and so I got down on the floor to amuse him," apologized Chrissie, gathering her arms and legs into neater compass, and trying to rise, but failing, because Wyn was at that moment sitting on her hair, and it was not easy to dislodge him.

Jessie went off in another fit of laughter, but Juliet picked up her small nephew, and held him, despite his struggles, whilst Chrissie got on her feet once more.

"See, he wants to play again; what a darling he is! How I wish he lived at our house! I was so happy when the baby from Beshawur was there," she cried, kissing the infant's plump pink toes, whilst he struggled to get at her hair again.

"Did you really like that black baby, Chrissie Felton? Now, I wouldn't have touched him with a pair of tongs," exclaimed Jessie, with a grimace of disgust.

Chrissie flushed crimson, and a hot retort came to her lips, but she stopped it in time, and instead turned to Juliet, asking in an abrupt tone:

"Are you coming to see mother now?"

"Yes, dear, I will come with you," Juliet replied, though she looked wofully white and unfit for exertion of any kind.

Mrs. Felton was sitting on the verandah, and

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held out a hand to welcome her visitor, a wan smile just touching her face, and then fading again.

"You have heard the news, and that they need reinforcements?" she asked, drawing Juliet down to a seat by her side, whilst Chrissie stood in front of them, balanced on one foot like a meditative sparrow.

"Yes, Chrissie told us," Juliet answered, speaking with an effort, and finding that to bear up and maintain a cheerful exterior under the shadow of disaster was much easier in theory than in practice.

Mrs. Felton gently patted the hand she had retained. "These are the times that try the bravest of us, Juliet. And we can only hope for the best, and pray without ceasing for our dear ones."

Juliet nodded, not daring to trust herself to speak just then. Her eyes had grown inconveniently full of tears, too, though she blinked hard to keep them from falling and openly disgracing her.

"There seems some mystery about the burning of that telegraph office at Chunderbah," continued Mrs. Felton, turning over the papers on her lap, among which lay the rough scrawl which was all that the captain had been able to send his wife, and which had been read a dozen times already.

"Wasn't it an accident?" asked Juliet, turning her head sharply to whisk away some of her unruly tears, whilst Chrissie considerately stared in an opposite direction.

"On that point there seems to be a great difference of opinion, some people declaring it to be the work of an incendiary, and others calling it an accident pure and simple."

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"It is hardly the time of year for accidental fires; see how wet everything is," said Juliet, in a musing tone.

"Just so. And the man who brought the tidings says that the wires were cut and the instruments broken at a little branch office to the west of Chunderbah."

Juliet shivered. On every side there hung ominous signs of approaching danger, and the burden of her responsibility weighed heavily upon her, as she thought of little Wyn and the two girls.

"How thankful you must be that Mrs. Boyd is spared the strain of this suspense!" Mrs. Felton said in a low tone.

"Indeed I am. Emily would have felt it keenly. How I wish we were men, we should not have to sit still then waiting for trouble to overtake us!" Juliet answered, with a sigh.

"I am not sitting still, Miss Boyd, I am learning to shoot," broke in Chrissie eagerly, "and I hit the bull's-eye once this morning; so if the Kajids come, I shall at least be able to shoot myself."

"I should think you might have managed to do so much without wasting either time or powder in practising," Juliet said, with an amused laugh.

"Oh! it requires some knowledge even to shoot one's self, that is, if one is going to do it in a workmanlike manner," Chrissie went on in a didactic tone, changing to the other foot, and maintaining her balance with some difficulty. "Of course, anyone could open her mouth and discharge a revolver in it, with the pretty certain chance of effectually

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settling the matter, but I should prefer to do a thing of that kind with neatness."

"Chrissie, how can you talk in such a manner, it is too horrible!" exclaimed Juliet, shrinking visibly; but Mrs. Felton only smiled.

The little girl's manner changed, and she began to talk in earnest, eager tones.

"Mother is not as shocked as you are, Miss Boyd, because we talk of these things every day, she and I, and so get used to horrors. Besides, you know, there may be no need to fear; father and the others are fighting bravely, and they have already recaptured some of the guns and a lot of the ammunition that was stolen from Alipahr; and when father wrote that letter he was just going off with a picked body of men to a place called—what is it, mother?"

"Wasji-Nullah. The Kajids have a camp there, and large stores of supplies," replied Mrs. Felton, her fingers lingering lovingly about the captain's letter.

"And father thinks if only they can capture those stores, the tribesmen will be compelled to disband for want of supplies, and then, before they could provision their army again, we could get heavy reinforcements to the front, and so be ready to meet them," Chrissie explained, her face flushing with excitement.

"And meanwhile," said Juliet rising, "I must go home and look after my young folks. Ah, see how the rain is coming down again!"

"You can't go, you will be wet through before you get to the gate of the compound, Miss Boyd," Chrissie said, as the downpour, falling on the zinc

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roof of the verandah, made such a din as to almost drown the sound of her voice.

Juliet waited for perhaps half-an-hour longer, then, finding no abatement of the rain, ventured out into it, armed with a big umbrella and fortified with a pair of goloshes. But despite these precautions, she was very damp indeed by the time she was safely housed again.

At sundown the rain ceased for a time, and two hours later, just as the moon rose, the second band of volunteers set out from Rampoostan for the relief of Alipahr.

The first troop had consisted of picked soldiers, perfectly disciplined, and all skilled in the art of warfare. But this second body of men was made up of all who could in any way be spared from their homes. Lieutenant Benson was in command, while Dr. Perry for the nonce took the next place in authority under him; the rank-and-file including such soldiers as still remained in quarters; the station-master, signalman, and porter, a sprinkling of bunniahs, bhistis, punkah-wallahs, and jampannies, and any other person, European or native, who offered his services, and was able to carry a musket.

When they were gone, Rampoostan was a desert. Business was at a standstill, trade languished, and a lethargy crept over the town, paralysing the energy of such inhabitants as still remained in the place, causing them to drone through the colourless days smoking hemp and sipping arrack, and generally qualifying for the outbreak of cholera, which week by week seemed more imminent and unavoidable.

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The chaplain, Mr. Austen, remained in the town. It had not been deemed advisable that he should accompany either expedition. The horse he would have needed served to carry a combatant, and the man of peace remained behind to comfort the women and children, and exhort the coloured population to a higher standard of excellence in personal cleanliness, and the purity of their drinking water.

Meanwhile, the rain it rained every day. The river rose inch by inch and foot by foot until it seemed as though even the eminence on which it stood would scarcely suffice to save Rampoostan from the danger and discomfort of floods.

The broken bridge was disappearing piecemeal, the continual swirl and fret of the current loosening fragment after fragment of iron and masonry, which were floated away, or swept to one side by the force of the waters.

At the shrine of Lukshmee great crowds gathered daily, whilst the Brahmins heaped rice in the wicker baskets of sacrifice, garlanding them with flowers to propitiate the fickle goddess, and turn away the destruction that threatened the town. Even Lal Musjid, that notorious unbeliever, took to religious observances in these days; and when things looked blackest, and the advancing waters had crept as far as the lowest-lying buildings of the town, he had messes of cooked food distributed to the poor, and himself perambulated the outskirts of the shrine seven times daily, his right hand outstretched towards the image of Lukshmee, and his head bowing low in the appointed place.

The revival of idolatrous worship proved not a

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little distressing to good Mr. Austen, who was so much of a missionary at heart, that he worked as hard in sowing the seeds of Christianity in the hearts of the heathen as in ministering to his own particular flock.

He took counsel with Mrs. Felton and Juliet concerning the best means to be adopted for throwing the worship of idols into disfavour; and Chrissie, who was present at the discussion, became suddenly remorseful at her own action in buying the Lukshmee for the man from Beshawur. It was dreadful to think how much her misplaced benevolence might have helped on the very state of things which Mr. Austen was deploring. And yet, somewhere deep down in her heart, she could not help feeling glad, in spite of it all, that she had given the poor fellow what he coveted so much, yet lacked the money to buy.

Juliet Boyd, too, although she listened with outward attention and sympathy to the chaplain's troubles, was too much absorbed in her anxieties to spare more than a passing notice to questions of creed and religion; for matters in the major's bungalow were rapidly nearing a crisis. She was already nearly penniless, and, despite her care and economy, plunging daily deeper into debt.

No tidings had been received from the major, nor, for the matter of that, from anyone else. No mails had been brought into Rampoostan since the breaking of the bridge, nor had any messengers arrived from Alipahr with news of the ebb and flow of battle there; and the world seemed to have come to a standstill, with nothing moving on but the rain.

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CHAPTER VII.

LAL MUSJID INSTITUTES PROCEEDINGS.

THE circumambulating form of worship had caught on in Rampoostan, and bade fair to become extremely fashionable among all who desired to keep up a reputation for ardent piety, and at the same time save their pockets. To pour forth rice, to offer red paint or bags of shells, or to bring combs with which the yellow goddess might comb her hair, involved expenditure. But to walk round the temple seven times daily, bowing each time the door was passed, the right hand rigidly outstretched towards the image enshrined within the building, was an exercise agreeable in itself, and not entailing undue responsibility on the devotee.

The waters of the river were receding slowly. The Brahmins said that this was due to the offerings of rice, flowers, shells, paint, combs, and the like, which had been poured forth in such abundance before Lukshmee; but the commoner folk, lacking the mystic wisdom of the Brahmins, attributed the shrinking of the river current to the fact that the rainfall had considerably lessened.

With the disappearance of danger came the dwindling of religious fervour, the crowds frequenting the temple grew daily smaller and less enthusiastic; and good Mr. Austen drew a long breath of relief, as he applied himself with renewed assiduity to expounding the truths of the Christian faith amongst the dusky heathen of Rampoostan.

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Chrissie, by dint of great earnestness, had induced Juliet to take lessons from her in shooting, and Gwen also had joined the others in target practice. Jessie was forbidden the use of a revolver, not so much from fear of any harm she might do herself, as from dread of the danger to other people, she being notoriously careless and untrustworthy.

But one day a tragic accident took place, which for a time stopped the progress of the three marks-women and considerably damped the zeal of at least one of them. It happened in this wise. Owing to the continued rain, which rendered outdoor occupation quite impossible, Chrissie had caused the target to be set up in a long, low shed built out beyond the servants' quarters. This shed, however, had been appropriated by some adventurous chickens as a good and desirable promenade and exercise ground during the rains, and no amount of shoo-shooing on the part of the shooters served to effectually scare them away, until one day, in desperation, Chrissie pointed her revolver at one of the intruders, and fired. To her grief and consternation, the chicken gave a despairing death-shriek, and rolled over dead, a few feet from the target.

It was almost ludicrous to see how Chrissie grieved for that poor chicken, and the shuddering horror with which she viewed the mutilated corpse of her victim. The more callous Jessie, who chanced to be a spectator, went into fits of laughter at the dismay she exhibited, whilst even Gwen's lip curled scornfully at this manifestation of weakness, or, as she called it, cowardice.

"If you can't shoot a silly chicken without faint-

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ing, Chrissie, how would you feel if the Kajids came, and you had the good luck to bowl one of them over?" she asked in a stinging tone.

"Oh, dear, I don't know! I'm sure I could not kill a man if he were to scream like that poor chicken!" Chrissie cried as she sat white and shivering on a three-legged stool that had been thoughtfully provided by Juliet.

"Most likely he'd scream a great deal louder. Bah! you are a baby, and your ancestors must have all been women," retorted Gwen, quoting from her mother, who had often used the Irishism in describing people of weak nerve.

"Hush, Gwen, that is not kind!" put in Juliet reprovingly. Then to Chrissie she said, "Come, dear, let us cease shooting for to-day, and I will call Huyyud to carry away that rash chicken, which would persist in trespassing on forbidden ground."

"I shall never want to shoot again, I am sure I sha'n't," sobbed Chrissie, suffering herself to be drawn away by Juliet's kind hands, whilst Jessie laughed, and Gwen sneered.

The incident, trivial though it was, served to cause much ill-feeling and unfriendliness between the girls. The Boyds declared that anyone showing the white feather as Chrissie had done, was not worth the notice or consideration bestowed upon her, and accordingly they made fun of her when she was absent, and sneered at her when she was present, until the poor girl became utterly depressed and miserable, even Juliet's championship failing to console her for the loss of esteem in the others.

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But nothing would induce her to touch a revolver again, the remembrance of the chicken's untimely end even causing her to shiver and turn pale when she heard the others at target practice in the shed.

Mrs. Felton had grown restless and anxious waiting for tidings from Alipahr; and despite the use of every precaution, had many a prophetic twinge of pain during the days when the waters of the swollen river were abating.

Juliet grew seriously concerned about her, being warned by the drawn look on her face, and the heavy shadows gathering under her eyes. She wondered, with very real trouble of heart, what would happen if Mrs. Felton fell ill before the doctor's return.

She was putting on her hat one morning early, in order to run in and see for herself how the invalid was, before commencing lessons with her pupils, when their one remaining house-servant, Anunda, came to her saying that Lal Musjid was waiting to speak to the mem on the side verandah.

A shiver of apprehension crept over Juliet at the tidings, for Lal Musjid was the owner of the bungalow in which they lived, and the rent was overdue. Besides which, it was almost eight weeks since Mrs. Boyd had left Rampoostan, and the money to repay the loan had not yet arrived. True, it might be waiting at Hussandabat, the nearest station on the other side of the river; but it might as well be in Bombay as there, for no communication was possible until the waters should fall sufficiently to allow the congested mails to be ferried over in boats. An ordinary landlord, even

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though he was money-lender as well, might have been induced by persuasion to see the necessity of exercising a little patient waiting in such a case, but Lal Musjid was not an ordinary landlord or money-lender either, and Juliet had grave doubts about his willingness to grant any further delay.

Her doubts were speedily resolved into certainties, when, with her hat on her head and her gloves in her hand, she went out to the side verandah and confronted Lal Musjid.

He salaamed until his beard almost swept the ground, then rising to his full height demanded in a low, servile tone, "The Huzoor hath he sent for his slave the money that was raised upon loan?"

Juliet felt herself grow pale, subjected to the fierce glare of his baleful eyes, but she rallied her courage to answer, "My brother, the major, as you doubtless already know, is away at Alipahr fighting the Kajids; but the money to repay your loan was to come from England, from the friends of Mrs. Boyd, and is, I suppose, lying with the mails at Hussandabat."

Lal Musjid frowned. Hussandabat was for the nonce almost as difficult of access as the North Pole. And, after all, the money was only supposed to be there.

"The mem-sahib knows the terms of the agreement, knows also that the rent is even now overdue?" he asked with a servile squirm.

"Certainly the money was lent upon the security of the furniture, and would have been paid before this, but for the accident which has delayed the mails. This accounts for the arrears of rent like-

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wise, and you surely would not press the claim under such circumstances," she said indignantly.

"In the law I might press for mine own at the time that is now," replied Lal Musjid, taking advantage of the fact that Juliet, being a woman, would probably know nothing of the legal rights of the case, "yet am I a man inclined unto mercy, and will grant you a few more hours, after which, if the money is not here, I will take instead the charpoys and the divans, with the other things belonging to Huzoor that are contained within the walls of the house."

"But it will be no more possible to pay you then than now, seeing the mails cannot be brought across the river," cried Juliet sharply, a wave of cold despair sweeping over her heart.

There was no softening in the crafty old face confronting her, and no lessening of the baleful triumph that gleamed from his eyes.

"Lal Musjid has spoken, he will abide by his word," he answered, salaaming again; and then, because Juliet was too utterly broken and crushed to answer him, he glided away, his rag-bound sandals leaving dirty smudges on the clean floor of the verandah, whilst an odour of hemp and arrack hung in his wake as he passed.

Juliet sank down on a bench, half-stunned by the force and suddenness of the blow. Only a few hours in which to raise the money to pay the loan and the rent, and save the major's household treasures from the desecrating hands of this rascally old money-lender!

The thought of those dirty, rag-bound feet

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trampling on Mrs. Boyd's delicate mats and cherished rugs, of his skinny brown fingers clutching eagerly at this ill-gotten pelf, was too much for Juliet to bear with equanimity, and after the first few moments of dull, numbing torture were past, she began to cast about in her mind for some means of escape from the ruin that was looming near.

There were so few English in the town at the time, and of these there were none to whom she could possibly apply for aid, saving Mr. Austen, the chaplain, and Mrs. Felton. The former would gladly have come to her assistance, she knew, but he was as poor as, or poorer than, themselves. The latter might have the power of helping her, for Juliet knew from regimental gossip that Mrs. Felton had money of her own, though the captain would allow none of it to be used to procure his own advancement; but in view of Mrs. Boyd's treatment of the "ranker's" wife in the past, it would be scarcely seemly to beg Mrs. Felton's aid at the present crisis.

And yet something must be done. Juliet rose with a quick, impatient movement, as the wail of Gwen's violin struck on her ears close by, while from underneath the verandah the voices of Anunda and Wyn's ayah rose in shrill dispute over some difference of opinion regarding their work. She had been on the point of starting to call on Mrs. Felton when interrupted by the money-lender, and she could at least carry out that intention, even if nothing else came of the interview.

There was no rain this morning, but a sharp wind

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scurried across the plain, stirring the waters of the river into little foam-crested ripples, and causing the thickets of tiger-grass that had sprung up in the compound of the empty bungalow next door, to rustle with a crackling sound like miniature castanets.

Chrissie came running to meet her. "Oh, Miss Boyd, how glad I am that you have come! There is bad news from Alipahr, and mother has fainted."

"What—what is it, Chrissie?" gasped Juliet, setting her teeth firmly, and clenching her hands, determined to show no weakness this time.

"Father and his men had an awful defeat at Wasji-Nullah. The Kajids were more than twenty to one, and drove them back into Alipahr, where they are shut up, and the Kajids are ravaging all the district round."

"And the major?"

Chrissie shook her head sorrowfully. "He must be a prisoner, or in hiding still. The letter does not mention him."

"If they are shut up at Alipahr, how did your father get a letter sent?"

"A man of Lieutenant Benson's party contrived to get away in the night, and came on here as quickly as he could."

"Lieutenant Benson got there safely?" enquired Juliet in a sharp tone, for the suspense was telling on her cruelly.

"Yes, he and his men were just in time to help father's company fight their way back to Alipahr. But for that help they must have been cut to pieces," sobbed Chrissie in great distress.

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"Chrissie, I must go to your mother. How bad she must feel!" exclaimed Juliet, on whom the shock of the tidings acted like a tonic, bracing her nerves for even fiercer trials yet to come, and causing her to forget for the moment the troubles that had pressed so heavily just before.

But Mrs. Felton still lay unconscious, and, remembering her repugnance at the thought of Chrissie witnessing her suffering, Juliet sent a hasty summons to Mr. Austen, and when he came, besought him to take Chrissie home to Gwen and Jessie, and to stay with her there for a time, until the mother should have recovered a little.

Gwen and Jessie met the chaplain with a torrent of questions, for bad news flies fast, and Anunda had told them of the tidings from Alipahr, as well as the significant fact that Major Boyd was still missing when the messenger had started.

"He is not dead. I am sure he cannot be dead. They have taken him prisoner, and will demand a ransom for him," exclaimed Gwen as the three girls drew together, the overhanging trouble banishing for the moment the aggressive superiority which two displayed and one resented.

"If only my mother were not so ill, I should not care so much," sobbed Chrissie, finding relief in breakdown, and forgetting past passages between herself and these two, which, if remembered, might have effectually barred the flood-gates of sympathy.

"She will be better when the shock is over, dear," Gwen said with a brave attempt at comfort; yet her tone was distinctly petulant when she turned

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to her sister. "Jessie, Jessie, don't cry like that. Where is the good of making so much noise? All the sobbing in the world won't bring dear father to life again if he is dead, or ransom him either if he is only a prisoner in the hands of the Kajids."

"I can't help crying. If he is a prisoner they may torture him," wailed Jessie yet more dismally.

"No, they won't," said Gwen sharply, though her face blanched and her lips quivered at the suggestion.

"Anunda says—" began Jessie in a dogmatic tone; but Mr. Austen gently interposed to save Gwen from the horrors of Anunda's very fertile imagination.

"The Kajids are wise, too wise to spoil such an opportunity of enriching themselves," he said in a reassuring tone. "They will not hurt the major if he has fallen into their hands. It would destroy their chance of making money out of him. But they will keep him safely, and may, if they are hard pressed, set him to work at the quern, or even give him some hoeing to do."

"Fancy father grinding corn!" said Jessie with a giggle. Her tears were wont to be short-lived, and she could laugh and cry almost at will.

"Grinding corn or hoeing it would not matter, if only we could know that he was safe," sighed Gwen.

"We shall hear in time. It is a case for patience," responded Mr. Austen. Yet he sighed, too, in spite of his determined cheerfulness.

The three girls were all the better for the tears they shed in company, and after a time Mr. Austen

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ventured to leave them, whilst he went to see how it fared with Mrs. Felton.

But the shock that had braced Juliet Boyd to fresh courage and endeavour, had snapped the brittle thread of the other's existence. And when the chaplain entered the house, it was to find that a greater than he had been before him, to lay a healing touch on the sick woman and bid her sufferings cease.

"And there is Chrissie to be told," said Juliet through the rain of her tears, as she stood with Mr. Austen, looking down into the quiet face, over which had dropped the eternal peace.

"Poor child!" he murmured, his own eyes for the moment dim.

"If only her mother might have said good-bye," sobbed Juliet, who was quite overcome.

"Better as it is, perhaps. I will go and bring her home again, Miss Boyd, and we will tell her together," he said, turning away.

They told her gently as might be, but it had come so suddenly that the poor child sat as if stunned by the blow, scarcely able to realize the thing they were telling her—that the Healer had come, and her mother was well for evermore.

CHAPTER VIII.

LAL MUSJID IN POSSESSION.

WITH the dawn next morning, Juliet stole softly forth from the house of death, to see how it fared with her own particular charges.

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In the compound of the empty bungalow, as she passed, a crowd of noisy parroquets were screaming and fighting over some cobs of Indian corn that one had found, and the others desired to share. Juliet looked at the brilliant-hued, fluttering things, feeling that she would like to stop her ears against the shrill, discordant shrieking, and hurried to reach the major's compound.

Squatted on the floor of the verandah was a man, whom at first she took to be Lal Musjid; but it was not that worthy, only a raggeder, dirtier edition of him, and with a sigh of relief she passed by, and went on into the house.

Inside the door another man was squatted, whilst Lal Musjid himself might be seen peering round the angle of the drawing-room door.

"What does this intrusion mean?" she demanded sternly, yet guessing intuitively what had occurred.

Lal Musjid salaamed, being by nature punctiliously polite, and then with a series of flourishes, intended to punctuate his periods, he informed her that having heard of Major Boyd's death, he had come to claim his own.

Juliet groaned. Anywhere, save in Rampoostan, the major's quarters would have been secured for him, and this humiliation would have been an impossibility. But all the officers quartered in the district took bungalows for themselves, pending the completion of the barracks; and Major Boyd had been content to rent a house from the old money-lender, as his predecessor in office had done before him. As to the loan itself, she did not stop to ask herself whether Lal Musjid could claim any-

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thing upon that; it was enough to her upright soul that the money had been borrowed, and not repaid.

"We have no proof that my brother is dead," she said quickly, resolved to make him wait a little longer if she could.

"If the Huzoor were not dead he would be at Alipahr, fighting for the frontier."

"But he may be a prisoner," said Juliet.

"In which case he can never repay to his slave the rupees he hath borrowed;" and Lal Musjid salaamed again, yet with a chuckle of satisfaction, for was he not in possession, and was not possession nine points of the law?

"That man on the verandah! is he your servant?" she demanded in a choked voice.

"Of a truth no! That is Naku, servant to the bunniah, who hath a heavy reckoning with the Huzoor, and waiteth but until my claim is settled to take what is left. And this is Yasthu, whose dealings with the Huzoor have beggared his body. Little enough of compensation will there be for him, yet waiteth he to satisfy the craving that clamoureth within him for justice," retorted Lal Musjid, pointing to the beggar who squatted in the entry.

Juliet shrank and shivered, knowing as she did the embarrassments of the position. They had always had difficulty in making the ends of their outgoings and incomings meet, but since the failure of the man for whom the major had been surety, the balancing of income and expenditure had become not merely difficult, but simply impossible.

Then a hand plucked at her sleeve, and, turning,

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she found Gwen at her elbow, looking white and frightened.

"Aunt Juliet! If they take everything, where can we go?"

The dreary hopelessness of the girl's tone whipped Juliet's courage to rallying point again, and she answered calmly:

"I think, for the present, we cannot do better than to ask Chrissie to let us remain with her."

"Must we go there?" asked Gwen, drawing back with a movement of distaste.

"Yes, for the present," repeated Juliet. "We found a letter last night, Gwen, that Mrs. Felton had written to me in anticipation of her death. In it she asked me to take care of Chrissie until Captain Felton's return, and if I cannot bring the poor child here, the next best thing is for us to go to her there."

Gwen said no more, and went in silence with her aunt to the nursery, where Wyn was capering and jumping in the arms of his ayah, and Jessie was calmly eating her breakfast.

"Stay here with them, Gwen, whilst I run back to the other house and speak to Chrissie; then I will come for you," Juliet said. Then she hurried away again, past Lal Musjid, and Yasthu, and that other claimant crouching on the verandah, who waited in the same stolid silence for the chance of redress, after Lal Musjid should have taken what seemed to him a just and equitable compensation.

In the verandah of the empty bungalow next door the parroquets were still screeching, and fluttering gaudy wings as they strove, each for

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itself, for the lion's share of the coveted corn. It was the same strife as that going on in the major's house, only with a difference: the parroquets fought on equal terms, and each screeched in hope of out-screeching the other. But in the major's house Lal Musjid gobbled up the whole, whilst Yasthu and the agent of the bunniah sat silently by to see him feed and satisfy himself. There was an absence of clamour which might go to mark the superiority of man over bird—but then there was an absence of fair-play, too, which perhaps made the balance even.

When Juliet reached the captain's house it was to find that Chrissie had fallen asleep, worn out with grieving. And not daring to wake her to make the request she had come to prefer, nor daring to linger, for Mrs. Felton's funeral was fixed for an early hour, she was forced to decide that they must come as uninvited guests.

Back again she hurried, panting with haste and anxiety, and reached the major's bungalow to find the girls gathered on the back verandah, with Wyn and his ayah. Lal Musjid having entered the nursery, they had fled at his approach, and were waiting for her return with growing impatience.

"Why are you here?" she asked in surprise.

"We were so frightened," said Gwen, who looked ready to cry.

"Lal Musjid is walking in and out of all the rooms," whimpered Jessie.

"Some things there are that we can surely claim, such as clothes and personal property of that sort," said Juliet, confronting Lal Musjid once more in

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the hope of wresting justice from his unwilling hands, even though nothing was to be expected from his generosity.

He did not even trouble to salaam this time, but stood calmly erect, surveying Juliet with the same triumphant indifference as that displayed by the fortunate parroquet on the verandah of the next house, the one which had secured the corn and swallowed it.

No, there was nothing that she might claim; all was his, so he said; even the hat she wore on her head, and the frock which clothed her, were legally his, had he chosen to press his claim. But he told her that a beneficent philanthropy reigned in his breast, and pervaded his actions, therefore these things she might keep, and not be shamed in the eyes of the world.

In vain Juliet protested and argued, in vain she threatened and expostulated, her eloquence had no more effect than the screeching of the parroquets on the other side of the fence, and finally, being out of breath, she desisted, feeling that Naku, Yasthu, and the others were after all wiser than she, as nothing was to be gained from argument but exhaustion.

"Let us go, children; the wrong will be righted some day perhaps," she said, taking Wyn in her arms and leading the way, whilst Gwen and Jessie followed behind, and the ayah brought up the rear, fondly hugging Wyn's india-rubber donkey, which she had successfully smuggled almost from under Lal Musjid's nose.

The parroquets were clustered on the verandah

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railings preening their feathers in the sunshine. With the disappearance of the corn they had struck up amicable relations again, which would doubtless continue until the next find occurred; but Lal Musjid would not so easily regain the good-will of his neighbours when he had made an end of swallowing the household substance of Major Boyd.

Juliet was in the uncomfortable position of an uninvited guest, and it troubled her sorely that she must take three children to disturb the quiet of that shadowed home, into which the presence of death had come. But there was no other place to which she could turn for shelter. Mr. Austen, their only other friend in Rampoostan, was a bachelor, and lived, moreover, in two tiny rooms above Jam Sirdu's bazaar, where he had scarcely room for himself, to say nothing of any one else.

Her heart beat a little faster, and the colour rushed hotly into her face, when Huyyud admitted them, though the inscrutable countenance of the well-trained servant showed no hint of the astonishment he might be supposed to feel.

At heart she believed Lal Musjid's action to be illegal, but she had scanty acquaintance with law, and there were none but native lawyers in the town. Besides, she did not want to make a stir in the matter, knowing it would not please her brother and his wife if their embarrassments were made public.

So for the present she waited, taking her charges to a little room at the back of the house, and establishing them there until the funeral should be over.

It was drawing near to sundown before Chrissie

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roused from her heavy slumber of exhaustion, and Juliet was sitting beside her when she awoke.

"I am glad you are here," murmured the girl, putting out her hand and touching Juliet's arm.

"Chrissie, I am in great trouble," she said.

"About the major? yes, I know;" and Chrissie's voice broke, for was she not in trouble too?

"Not that altogether, some things have to be left, and that is one of them. But the most prominent of my worries just now is that Lal Musjid has seized on the house and furniture, and we have nowhere to go."

"You can come here," replied Chrissie, with a sound of surprise in her tone that so simple a solution of the difficulty should have escaped the common-sense and practical Miss Boyd.

"That is just what we have done, dear; Gwen, Jessie, Wyn, his ayah, and myself, we are all here, and for the present we are no better than beggars, like those people from Beshawur, worse, in fact, for they had a goat, and we have nothing, except indeed Wyn's india-rubber donkey," and a hysterical laugh came up in her throat and choked her utterance.

Chrissie patted softly the hand she was holding, "I am glad you had to come, Miss Boyd, because now I can be with you as mother wished."

Ah, yes! that was the one ray of brightness in the dark gloom of the present, for it gave Juliet a chance of obeying the behest of the dead.

"You shall always be with me if you will, Chrissie," she answered, "for your mother's sake and your own."

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"And we will bear our troubles together," sighed Chrissie with an air of relief, then nestled closer in her guardian's arms, feeling that she had found a true shelter there.

CHAPTER IX.

COMMON DANGERS.

TWENTY-FOUR hours more, and Rampoostan, what remained of it at least, was in a panic.

It was not flood this time, but fever, and the great temple where Lukshmee had her shrine was almost entirely deserted, whilst the crowds who had been sacrificing to her to get her help and deliverance from the danger of impending flood, flocked away to a small mud hovel in a different part of the town, where an image of Sheetula was set up.

There had been several epidemics of small-pox in Rampoostan, and a temple had been erected to Sheetula in the hope that she might avert similar outbreaks in the future. Whether or not this availed in preventing sickness, certain it is there had been no small-pox in the town since the image had been brought there.

Sheetula had no reputation as a healer of fevers, but the people argued that she would doubtless have some influence with the deity who made a speciality of that class of disease, and therefore they besieged the mud hut with offerings, green leaves of curds, dough-cakes, honey, millet, wheat, rice, maize, live chickens, dead chickens, a goat or

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two, until the poor old fakir, who had lived in semi-starvation on almost nothing at all since the last unhealthy time, was driven nearly wild with a superabundance of provisions. No fear of starvation now, though there were probabilities in plenty that he might make himself ill with excess of feeding.

The fever, which was of a malignant malarial type, took an erratic course. Down one alley it would go, claiming a victim or two from every house, then, leaving adjacent houses untouched, it would break out with renewed virulence in quite another part of the town.

Mr. Austen was dead. He quietly succumbed two days after Mrs. Felton passed away, and Juliet was left without a single friend or adviser in the town. Chrissie was ill too, though not with fever. The shock of her mother's death had been too much for her not very robust frame, and she lay through the long, weary days, white, weak, and languid, taking small notice of anything, save when they brought Baby Wyn to lie beside her for his siesta. Then her thin face would flush a delicate pink, and her eyes light up with some of their old animation.

But when Master Wyn awoke refreshed from his slumber, and began to kick and struggle in boisterous baby glee, the flush would fade from her face, and in a weary voice she would beg that he might be taken away because she was so tired.

Juliet herself had flagged seriously under the burden of so many troubles, and this new care on Chrissie's account bade fair to break down her little remaining strength.

As to Gwen and Jessie, nothing ailed them except

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perhaps their normal discontent, and they were alternately sullen or openly impertinent to their aunt, treating her as if she alone were to blame for all the troubles and discomforts that had come upon them.

Yet their lot did not hold much of hardship, though their position was certainly mortifying and uncomfortable. It was not pleasant to them to be dependent upon charity, especially upon the charity of a social inferior; and so day after day they railed at their bondage, and worried their aunt to the utmost limits of her endurance, never dreaming what fate had in store, or the stern discipline that awaited their rebellious natures in the future immediately before them.

Every day, and many times in every day, Juliet's eyes were turned in wistful anxiety to the narrow strip of road that stretched like an endless red ribbon across the plains towards Chunderbah. This road was plainly visible from the back verandah of Captain Felton's bungalow, and the moving figures upon it had all a fascination for her, especially those whose faces were turned towards the town.

Not a word had reached them from Alipahr, though the air was full of rumours of the gravest sort. But on the other hand they had, to comfort them, the knowledge that the river current was slackening daily; in a week, or ten days at the furthest, it would be possible to cross, and then help, or at least escape on that side, would be within the range of possibilities.

Meanwhile Gwen and Jessie filled their leisure hours with writing long letters to their mother, in which they poured forth the burden of their

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wrongs, mixed incoherently with lamentations for their father, and always winding up with piteous entreaties to be sent for to England, the El Dorado of all their hopes. These letters could not be posted, for they had no stamps, nor money with which to purchase them.

There was little to be gained in posting letters in Rampoostan at this time, seeing that no mails for the south could leave, and even the northward service was practically stopped. The baboo who presided over the post-office had used all his available rice-bags to store the accumulated mails, hanging them from hooks in the rafters, beyond the reach of the rats which swarmed in the place. But even this precaution could not avail against the ravages of the white ants, and the delayed correspondence of the town was in a fair way towards being resolved into primitive matter once more, ere ever the postal service could be resumed.

Lal Musjid lived in state at Major Boyd's bungalow, leaving his curio-stall to the care of a hireling, who did as hirelings will, and wasted his master's time and substance in the most approved fashion, until one day the fever caught him, and he died miserably, stretched out among the idols and charms crowding the tiny room behind the stall. Despite their boasted powers, they had not availed to save him from disease and death.

A runner, panting and exhausted, reached the town one night at sunset. He had made the journey against time, it seemed, and in the act of giving his message, which was a verbal one, fell forward and expired.

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The event caused some excitement in the place. The man had uttered two words only, "Kajids—Chunderbah", but they were of sufficient significance to cause much uneasiness and unrest amongst the property-holders of the place. The Kajids might just as fitly have been named the cadgers, their sole ambition in life being to plunder and destroy. If they swooped down on the town, they would not leave one bit of portable property in it that they could by any means carry away.

Anxiously, very anxiously did the keepers of the bazaars look towards the swirling waters of the river; but no escape in that quarter was possible as yet, while to strike out across the plain in any direction was equally impracticable, seeing that bunds had broken their banks, irrigation canals made channels of their own, and even the usually harmless village tanks had been converted into wide lakes or yawning pools of unknown depth and danger.

Huyyud brought the news of the runner's arrival and death to Juliet, urging her to flee with her charges whilst flight was possible.

Gwen and Jessie, overhearing this, went into a state of panic straight away, falling upon their aunt and adjuring her, with all the entreaties they could think of, to take Huyyud's advice and fly without delay.

But, with the best will in the world to take them out of reach of possible danger, Juliet was powerless to move. The few horses and mules left in the town had already been requisitioned by the richer natives, and dhooli transport would scarcely have

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availed in flight from an enemy so active and alert in pursuit as the Kajids.

So she was perforce compelled to say no to their pleading, exhorting them, with a timorous note in her voice, to trust in God and not be afraid. The tremor arose not from any quailing on her own part, but from a diffidence in mentioning such a thing as unwavering trust in a higher power, before these scoffing, sneering nieces of hers, whose natures had so little of reverence in their composition.

"It's all very well to preach, Aunt Juliet, but just a little practice would be much more to the point," Gwen said in an impatient tone.

"Oh dear, if mother were here, she would do something!" whimpered Jessie, with an aggravating stress on the pronoun.

"She would be as powerless as I am under the circumstances," Juliet answered in a sort of dull patience, that had become almost a habit with her in her intercourse with her nieces.

Jessie broke out into noisy weeping, whilst even Gwen sniffed aggressively; and, unable to calmly bear anything further in the matter of reproaches, Juliet turned and fled, seeking the quiet shelter of Chrissie's room in which to smooth her ruffled plumage, and gain fresh patience for her next trial of endurance.

Baby Wyn was there, rolling about on the floor in supreme content, while the ayah crouched on the ground close by, and Chrissie watched the pair from her couch.

"Any news, Miss Boyd?" she asked, noticing the

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cloud on the usually serene face, and the quick, nervous movement betokening worry.

"None that is good enough for telling, I fear," Juliet answered with a smile.

"Let me have the bad, then. It won't be any the worse for being told, you know, and might even be a tiny bit better," said Chrissie with an answering smile.

Juliet's brow was clearing rapidly, and away from the painful pertinacity of Gwen and Jessie, the outlook did lose much of its gloom, and an invasion of Kajids became a remote and unlikely contingency.

"Time enough for that when rumour becomes fact. Until then, Chrissie, we have nothing to do but wait," Juliet replied in an easier tone.

Chrissie was better and brighter that day, and Juliet organized a small tea-party in her honour, to which Gwen and Jessie were duly invited.

They had seen but little of Chrissie since Mrs. Felton's death, though living under the same roof; and their manner was sullen, even distinctly ill-used, when they gathered about the tea-table, which had been set out in the pink-and-white chamber.

But Jessie was speedily vanquished by the array of cakes and sweetmeats spread out for their delectation, and even Gwen ceased to frown and pout after a time, and though she was not exactly amiable, she was many shades less disagreeable.

And as the meal went on they grew quite merry over it. Wyn, who was also of the party, contributed not a little to the general entertainment by his valiant endeavours to secure for himself as large a share as possible of the sweetmeats that, piled

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high in a silver basket, adorned the centre of the table.

But his arms were short, and he could not reach, so, after many unsuccessful attempts, he gave up striving for the impossible, contenting himself instead with seizing the sugar-bowl and upsetting the whole of its contents into his pinafore.

His howl of dismay at finding that even this was a disputed possession brought in the ayah to see what ailed her nursling, and Master Wyn was borne off to his bed with a big lump of sugar clutched in either fat fist, and crying lustily for more.

Then evening came on, and the darkness of a moonless night settled down on Rampoostan, while the noisy roar of the river current drowned the thud of advancing hoofs, as a body of Kajids, well-mounted and well-armed, drew nearer to the unsuspecting town.

CHAPTER X.

RAMOOR, "THE CITY OF GOD".

WHEN morning dawned, the dwellers in Rampoostan opened their eyes to find the enemy they dreaded already surrounding the town—a thousand picked soldiers, all armed with rifles of the most approved pattern, and with well-filled ammunition-bags slung under their arms.

No wonder that the hearts of the common people melted and became as water in their breasts, when

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they found these sturdy hill warriors at their doors, standing like a grim embodiment of fate, ready to shoot down all that resisted.

But they did not resist, valuing their lives more than the vessels of brass, and jewels of gold and silver, with which the Kajid raiders were already loading their transport mules. And the hill robbers, encouraged by their easy victory, grew quite merry over their task of despoiling the town, even pressing some of the frightened people into their service, making them assist in the labour of packing their household treasures into neat compass for the enemy to carry away.

Juliet, coming out of Chrissie's room in the freshness of the autumn dawn, was confronted by a tall, sinewy figure in a picturesque collection of rags, surmounted by an old skin coat, standing sentinel outside the door, the gleam of the rising sun making the barrel of his rifle shine like beaten gold.

He did not show any active hostility, nor, on the other hand, did he salute. He simply stood still in his place and stared at her, whilst she on her part stared back with blanched cheeks and a very lively sensation of fear in her heart.

She did not speak to him, being fearful of frightening Chrissie, and, after the first startled pause, made a movement as though to go forward. But a sudden significant uplifting of that gleaming rifle-barrel brought her to an abrupt stand, and forced her to ask, though in a lowered voice, what he required of her.

To this query, though several times repeated, he

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made no reply, unless indeed a solemn shake of his turbaned head might be regarded as such. Thinking he failed to understand what she said, Juliet made one more attempt to pass him, but the menace of his rifle-barrel was not to be lightly encountered, and she had to resign herself to the inevitable, and stay where she was.

That they were to be held in some sort of durance was plain enough, and, summoning her courage by a desperate effort, Juliet turned towards the room she had quitted, and, without entering, stood on the threshold and spoke to Chrissie, who was still in bed.

"Get up, Chrissie, and dress yourself as quickly as you can, put on thick clothing, dear, a serge dress, if you have one at hand," she said with a ring of authority in her voice.

"What is it, Miss Boyd? is anything wrong?" Chrissie asked in a tone of surprise.

"I am afraid so, dear," Juliet replied, "but I don't really know yet, only it is best to be prepared for contingencies."

Chrissie did not reply, but Juliet heard her get out of bed and begin to move hurriedly about the room. Then she closed the door, for the man was standing in a line with it, and she did not choose that he should be a spectator of the little girl's toilet operations.

The room where Gwen and Jessie were sleeping was lower down the corridor, and to reach it she would have to pass that gleaming, murderous rifle-barrel.

Brave as she was, she was wise also. And her life was of too much value to the young folks under

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her charge for her to risk it by any act of imprudence or folly. There were other ways of attracting their attention, however, and, raising her voice, she called loudly to them, her tone growing sharp and shrill as, receiving no answer, a terrible fear possessed her lest harm had come to them, or that they had already been carried away prisoners by this rapacious foe.

"What's the matter, Aunt Juliet?" asked Gwen presently in a sleepy voice, thrusting her head out from her chamber door, and as quickly withdrawing it again on discovering the grim Kajid standing not more than ten paces distant.

"Dress at once, both of you," Juliet called in an urgent tone, but she did not tell them, as she had told Chrissie, to put on warmer clothing, knowing, alas! only too well that they had nothing beyond the thin frocks in daily wear, Lal Musjid having persisted in his refusal to restore to them the possession of their wardrobes.

She herself had only a blue linen frock to wear, though Chrissie had besought her to take what she needed from Mrs. Felton's wardrobe. But this Juliet had steadily refused to do, feeling that it would be easier to go about in rags than to touch what must of necessity be sacred in the eyes of the motherless child.

By the time Chrissie was dressed, Wyn's ayah appeared with him in her arms He was fresh and rosy from his bed and bath, and clutched delightedly at the gleaming rifle-barrel as he was carried past the grim sentinel, who attempted no opposition to the ayah's approach.

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Juliet took Wyn into her arms, saying in a low voice to the ayah, "Speak to that man, see if you can make him understand, and ask what it is he wants of us."

The ayah dragged her veil closer, as though protesting against this command of her mistress to hold converse with a strange man; then, pitching her voice into a shrill scream, she cried: "Dog of a hill-Kajid, what askest thou at the hands of the sahib-logue?"

To this civil enquiry the man responded in deep gutturals, unmeaning sounds to Juliet, for they expressed neither Hindu nor Urdu, nor indeed any language that she had ever heard.

The ayah understood, however, and turned to her mistress with a face of alarm. "He says, oh gracious mem-sahib, that all the rich and wealthy ones of the town are to be carried away into captivity and held at ransom!"

Juliet shivered. True, she had expected no less; and the words "held at ransom" brought a certain sense of confidence with them, implying protection from cruelty or death, that she had scarcely dared to hope for. Nevertheless captivity of any sort was not to be lightly regarded, especially in view of accompanying hardships that must most surely await them if they were to be carried off to the hills at the commencement of winter.

"Ask him when we are to start," said Chrissie, who had come out unperceived by Juliet, and was standing close beside her.

The ayah shrieked at the sturdy savage again, calling him by the most abusive epithets her vocabu-

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lary could furnish, and he replied in the same manner as before.

"He says as soon as the dhoolies can be made ready, and that the journey will be long, reaching even to the snows," interpreted the ayah, her voice broken and troubled, for neither the journey nor its destination commended itself to her. Yet the possibility of deserting her charge and remaining behind never once seemed to present itself to her mind.

Juliet, however, was already deep in consideration of ways and means.

"Ask him if all of us are to go, or whether the young ones may remain here," she said, deciding to give herself unreservedly into the hands of the marauding savages, if only the children might be left behind.

The ayah screamed this question in the same manner as she had done before, but the man told her that he knew nothing; the Great Nom was coming, and he would decide.

"Miss Boyd, if we are taken to the hills, won't it be very cold?" Chrissie asked in a distressed tone.

"I am afraid so," Juliet answered sadly; "but perhaps, Chrissie, we can induce the Great Nom to leave you young ones behind and only take me."

"I shall go if you do, of course; you know that you promised to take care of me. But I wasn't thinking of myself, but Gwen and Jessie. They have nothing warm to wear, you know. Jessie can have one of my frocks, but Gwen must have one of mother's, and so must you, for that cotton frock won't be of much use in Kajid territory during the

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cold weather," said Chrissie, drawing a scornful finger down the sleeve of Juliet's thin summer gown.

There was sound common sense in the statement, and doubtless Mrs. Felton's wardrobe would be the spoil of busy-fingered thieves before many hours were over, so there could be no harm in taking what was necessary now.

Telling the ayah to get permission from the Kajid sentinel for Gwen and Jessie to come to Chrissie's room, Juliet went in with the little girl and commenced a hasty rummage of drawers and trunks, in order to get what was most suitable in the shape of clothing.

Luckily Mrs. Felton's wardrobe was amply stocked, not merely with the thin frocks suitable for wear in the plains, but also with tweeds and serges for colder regions. Although some of these last were decidedly old-fashioned in cut and style, they were so exceedingly useful just now that no one dreamed of taking exception to them in any way.

Gwen and Jessie wore scared, frightened faces, refrained from complaining, and were altogether meek and subdued when they came past the Kajid sentinel to the room where Juliet and Chrissie were so busy turning over big piles of clothing.

Scarcely had the necessary change of garments been effected than the ayah, who had remained outside the door to guard them, or at least to give notice of intrusion, put in her head to inform Juliet that the Great Nom had arrived and desired to speak with her.

"Let me come too; oh, Miss Boyd, I must!"

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pleaded Chrissie as, white and trembling, Juliet turned to obey the summons.

"You had better remain here with the others," Juliet replied, yet with so little resolution in her tone that Chrissie only clung the tighter to her, refusing even a momentary separation.

But the Great Nom, despite his magnificent appellation, was only a shrunken, wizened-faced little man, of a mean aspect and thin tremulous voice. There was nothing very threatening in his appearance certainly, and in the curious reaction caused by her surprise Juliet came near to laughing in his face.

He was very oddly dressed in garments of red and blue, fringed with yellow, the lower one sweeping the ground like a woman's petticoat. On his head he wore a high cap made of sheep-skin and shaped like a turban, but this latter was thickly encrusted with gold and precious stones, which scintillated and flashed in odd contrast to the tattered sandals bound upon his dirty feet.

The Great Nom was wuzeer to the Rajah of Beshawur, and so much in the habit of standing proxy for the monarch he represented as to have come to regard himself almost as the rajah.

He salaamed to Juliet, not with the servility of a servant but with the condescension of one who deigns to notice an inferior.

"May I ask the meaning of this intrusion?" Juliet demanded in a cold tone, by no means overawed by this near approach to majesty, though her eyes were fascinated by the glitter and the sparkle of the wuzeer's jewelled cap.

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THE GREAT NOM.

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The little man frowned at the lack of servility in her tone, but supposing her to be in ignorance of his high estate, forthwith proceeded to enlighten her.

"I represent his Serene Excellence the Rajah of Beshawur, being in mine own person styled the Great Nom, and acting as wuzeer or prime minister over the dominions of the majesty aforesaid. And in my official capacity I have come to inform you that you are prisoners of war, and will be held subject to ransom."

"We are British subjects of Kaiser-i-Hind. You may not lay unlawful hands upon us," retorted Juliet, making an effort to brave out the situation and frighten the little tyrant if she could.

But he nodded his head in calm approval over this statement. "It is well. Kaiser-i-Hind hath riches untold—gold, diamonds, gems, horses, guns, and all good things, but my master lacketh much that ministereth to the appetite and filleth the soul with content, therefore holdeth he the children of the White Queen to ransom that he too may have wealth in return."

"Oh! but we are poor people, quite poor, it is of no use to take us; our friends have no money with which to ransom us," Juliet said quickly, thinking that possibly he would not be so eager to carry them away captive if the chances of gaining by it appeared in any way remote.

But the Great Nom's wizened features relaxed into a smile. "Kaiser-i-Hind hath many children, yet is not one of them permitted to suffer unsuccoured. Lo, then, white-faced daughter of the

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White Queen, bring forth thy kindred who shelter with thee, for even now the dhoolies wait."

As he spoke the last word, he clapped his hands together sharply, and a crowd of dusky warriors clustered in and about the doors. A very motley crew they were, with only two points of likeness, their dusky skins, and the excellence of the weapons they carried. At sight of them, Chrissie's courage waned, and she began to cry, but Juliet whispered to her to be brave, and fear nothing; then, taking Wyn from the arms of his sorrowing ayah, she called Gwen and Jessie to come.

Escorted by the Kajid warriors, the little party moved out of the house and across the compound to the road beyond, where a string of dhoolies were waiting, in company with a long train of mules heavily laden with the spoils of Rampoostan.

Juliet and her charges were not the only prisoners, and she was greatly relieved to find other white women, the wives and daughters of civilians, among the number. Even captivity lost something of its horror at the prospect of its being shared by her countrywomen; and relief gave place a little later on to a secret amusement at sight of Lal Musjid astride a baggage-mule, with his hands tied behind him.

Why the Kajids had chosen to carry him away prisoner she could not understand, but decided that they must have a very flattering opinion concerning the generosity of government to suppose that the ransom bestowed would repay them for the trouble and expense of conveying so many people to so great a distance.

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Then the weary pilgrimage began, and none but those who suffered the horrors of it could adequately understand its full misery.

At first on the level roads of the plains it was more endurable, but when the hills were reached, and the path wound up and down among the rocks and crags of the lower hills, the real strain of the journey began. The suffering captives—bumped, and bruised, and battered—would sometimes beg for the relief of walking, to rest their tortured bodies from the shaking of the dhoolies. But the road was so uneven, and so terribly fatiguing to the unaccustomed feet of the prisoners, that this exercise soon palled upon them, and then they were fain to retreat to the dhoolies again, to be bumped, and bruised, and battered as before.

Once or twice in that long march they paused for a whole day to rest the bearers and the mules, but on both occasions this halt appeared to be made under protest as it were, and because it was unavoidable. These stoppages were made in deserted, almost inaccessible recesses of the hills, and the strictest watch and ward was kept that none should escape or raise an alarm.

After these brief rests they would press forward at quite a feverish rate of speed, but always by the most unfrequented ways, as though fearing a rescue. And although much of the country through which they passed bore signs of tillage, they never once came within hail of a village, or a human habitation of any kind.

Chrissie had lost much of her languor and weakness, despite the hardship of the journey; and she

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proved a most invaluable nurse to Wyn. Gwen and Jessie moaned, wept, and lamented, but they would not arouse themselves from their selfish abstraction to amuse the poor baby, or beguile the tedium of the way for him. He could not understand where his faithful slave of an ayah had gone, and did not approve the coarser fare on which he had to satisfy his hunger; and because of this failure to comprehend why he was so hardly done by, he kicked, and screamed, and fought, refusing to be soothed by the blandishments of Juliet, and only consenting to smile when Chrissie came to snap her fingers in his face, and play bo-peep from behind her hair.

At last there came a day when the mud walls of a town loomed before their eyes, and signs of more careful tillage appeared all around.

"Miss Boyd, where are we coming to, do you suppose?" cried Chrissie in an eager tone, when a turn in the track brought the town into view.

"The end of our journey, I hope," replied Juliet, peering eagerly out through the curtains of the dhoolie.

"Oh, dear, what a horrid place; there is nothing there bigger than a stable or a cook-house!" cried Gwen in dismay, as she, too, craned her neck to see the prospect before them.

"I don't mind how small it is, I would be thankful for a chicken coop even, if only it stood still," said Jessie, who had suffered greatly from the nausea common to many who travel in dhoolies, and which is nearly akin to sea-sickness.

"I shall want to sleep for a week after so

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much travelling," said Gwen with a yawn and a shiver.

"Are you cold, Gwen?" Juliet asked, leaning further from the dhoolie in which she was riding, to look across at Gwen, who was being conveyed in another that was close alongside.

"No; I'm hot, burning hot, except now and then when a big chill goes all down my back, and my limbs ache dreadfully—do you think I am going to be ill?" she asked, lifting her heavy eyes to look at her aunt.

"I hope not. I have some quinine in my bag, and I will give you a dose when we reach our next stopping place," Juliet replied as brightly as she could, although she was secretly dismayed at Gwen's appearance, and feared that she was in for an attack of influenza.

As they neared the mud walls of the town, it proved to be of greater extent and importance than had seemed possible at the first, long barn-like edifices covered with strange carving visible even at a distance could now be seen above the walls, and about these larger buildings many smaller ones were clustered, but whether they were human habitations or merely storehouses, the travellers could not determine.

When they were within half a mile of the gate, the Great Nom rode alongside of Juliet's dhooli, his bejewelled turban, or cap, glittering in the sunshine, and his yellow-fringed garments spread out with a view to effective display, on the back of his mule.

"Yonder is Ramoor, the City of God, and there

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shall you be held in safe-keeping, until the White Queen sends money to ransom you out of the hand of my master, his Serene Excellence the Rajah of Beshawur," he said, salaaming in his usual supercilious fashion.

Juliet bowed in her turn, her manner to the full as haughty as his. "It may be that the ransom will be paid in shot and shell if you do not have a care, Mr. Wuzeer," she rejoined haughtily, for somehow the little prime minister, with his foppish airs and affected manner, got upon her nerves to quite a serious extent, and she could rarely resist the temptation to have a fling at him when opportunity offered.

"You threaten me, and through me, my master, who is his Serene Excellence the Rajah of Beshawur?" exclaimed the Great Nom, his wizened, dusky face puckered and distorted with rage.

"We are children of Kaiser-i-Hind; her arm is long, and her vengeance does not fail to fall on all who oppress her people," Juliet answered calmly, using the pompous phraseology of her captors, because she found it more effective.

"The woman-with-the-froward-tongue shall be lodged in the Highway of the Sacred Ox," commanded the Great Nom to the subordinate who rode at his side.

Jessie, who overheard this new name for her aunt, gave way to an irrepressible giggle of amusement, and even Gwen smiled languidly, but Chrissie took instant alarm, and boldly addressed the rajah's representative, making her tone as defiant as possible.

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"And shall we also be sent to lodge in the Highway of the Sacred Ox, for we too have tongues, and can use them?" she said, thrusting her head out of the dhooli, and glaring fiercely at the little man.

Wyn was just then sharing her dhooli, and, being rolled over by the quickness of her movement, set up a lusty howl as though anxious to assert his claim to a tongue likewise. At this Jessie went off into a shout of laughter, which further angered the Great Nom, causing him to kick his mule smartly, and as he left he snarled:

"Let them all be lodged in the Highway of the Sacred Ox, since of a surety they are not fit to stay in any other place."

Chrissie clapped her hands in delight when he had gone, and openly exulted in the thought that they would have the good fortune to live all together. But Juliet was grave enough, being filled with anxiety concerning the manner of their living, and the chance of their plight becoming known to their countrymen in the plains.

Ramoor at close quarters was by no means attractive as a place of residence. It consisted of one chief street, paved in some places with slabs of stone, in others with small rough cobbles, and everywhere abounding in muddy pitfalls, into which the drainage from the houses collected in foul-smelling pools, into which all kinds of garbage were thrown, to be fought for by lean and hungry dogs, and equally lean and hungry children. From this main street opened two or three filthy alleys leading to the temples, and called by their names. Thus the Highway of the Sacred Ox was the abominable

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little alley leading to the door of the temple dedicated to that particular deity.

Lining either side of this delectable thoroughfare were queer little huts, looking not unlike packing-cases laid upon their sides, the whole front being open to the street. Beyond this outer apartment was an inner one, with no window at all, and approached by a doorway so low that no one except a child could enter without stooping.

Before one of these houses, if indeed such hovels could be dignified by the name, the train of dhoolies stopped, and Juliet and her charges found themselves deposited in a tiny room, which was just about large enough for the five of them to sit upon the floor in company.

Jessie's former hysterical shouts of laughter were turned into a very dismal whimpering when she recognised the character of the abode assigned to them, and even Chrissie broke down, though her weeping was of a less noisy character.

But Juliet had little opportunity for tears or regrets, being occupied in doing what she could to alleviate the sufferings of poor Gwen, who by this time was very ill indeed, and lay stretched out upon the dirty floor moaning continually. Wyn was of all the party the least concerned about the situation, for he had found a big cockroach on the floor, and was engaged in hot pursuit; the shiny black creature evading his delighted attempts at clutching it in a most elusive manner. The difficulty of capture, however, did but add to the pleasure of the chase, and he crawled to and fro in the limited space, chuckling and crowing in baby

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glee because he had found a plaything that could run away from him; it was even better than his beloved india-rubber donkey, which lay discarded on the floor by his side.

Juliet had stripped off the skirt of her dress and spread it on the floor for Gwen to lie upon, and was making a pillow of various other articles of attire, when Chrissie, who had cried until she was ashamed of herself, sat up, and, straightening her back, exclaimed in surprise: "Look, Miss Boyd, at that big goat; I believe the creature is coming into our house!"

"He will hardly find room, I should think, seeing that we are pretty well crowded already," Juliet answered, not much heeding what was said, being absorbed in ministering to poor Gwen. But a minute later a shriek from Jessie, a shout from Chrissie, and a bump at her elbow, caused her to turn round hastily, to find the big goat standing close beside her.

"Turn him out, Jessie; frighten him away, Chrissie, he will trample upon Gwen and Wyn!" she cried in great excitement, pushing at the goat with her hands, and shoo-shooing with all her might.

But Chrissie was clapping her hands and exclaiming: "Don't drive him away, dear Miss Boyd, don't drive him away, he is the goat from Beshawur that came to Rampoostan, and here comes Musef carrying Narudu!"

Juliet desisted then from her efforts to eject the too presumptuous visitor, and, looking up, saw a woman coming towards them from the opposite house, carrying a brown baby in her arms.

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CHAPTER XI.

THE RAISING OF THE SIEGE.

IN the beleaguered fort at Alipahr something near akin to starvation prevailed. The water-supply was plentiful enough, indeed it was much too plentiful when the rain was falling, for the fort was by no means water-tight. The crazy roofs leaked dismally on to the brave little band that formed the garrison, for the driest place had to be reserved as a store for the ammunition.

As day after day passed and found them unrelieved, the besieged looked each other the more steadily in the face, and handled their weapons with significant gestures. But no one spoke, or even thought, of surrender, for Alipahr must be held, even should it cost the lives of the whole garrison.

They did not know—how should they?—of the raids on Chunderbah and Rampoostan, nor that the river bridge had been swept away and communication with the world beyond suspended for a time. But they knew how short their food supplies were growing, and how much more ammunition was contained in the magazine; and eyes were turned anxiously to the quarter from which, it was hoped, the relief column would at last arrive.

Major Boyd was not in the fort. Some thought that he was a prisoner in the hands of the Kajids, others, that, finding himself surrounded and cut off from joining the main body, he had gone into hiding

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in the hope of giving tidings of the state of affairs at Alipahr and bringing up the much-needed reinforcements.

Captain Felton believed him to be dead, but, like a wise man, he kept his opinion to himself, and refrained from advancing any theories concerning his strange disappearance.

There came at last a day when it was announced that only one week's food, supplied at the rate of half rations a day, remained in the fort.

"What shall we do—abandon the fort and make a rush on the next dark night that comes, trusting to our luck to reach Chunderbah?" asked Captain Felton, taking counsel of Lieutenant Benson and Dr. Perry.

"Make a rush by all means, but not in the direction of running away. I want to have a go at those Kajid scamps, by way of paying them back for shutting us up in this hole so long," replied Benson, with the fiery zeal of youth and a very natural desire to retaliate on the foe that had caused them so much suffering and semi-starvation.

"Softly, softly, youngster!" put in Dr. Perry with the air of a patriarch. "There have been too many lives lost over this business already. No use to throw away any more if we can avoid it."

"Running away is such a cowardly business," growled the young man in a dissatisfied tone.

"So it may be; but it is safe—sometimes. You know the old adage, 'He that fights and runs away'," quoted the doctor with a smile.

"I say, Perry, don't you think our friends outside are uncommonly quiet this morning?" asked Captain

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Felton suddenly. He had been carefully scanning through a loophole in the rickety tower the cluster of mud huts under the deodar trees on the other side of the nullah, where the besiegers had their head-quarters.

Dr. Perry took the captain's glass and brought it to bear on the spot in question. "It looks queer; I can't see a living creature of any kind. Perhaps, though, it is merely a ruse to get us from shelter in order to finish us off in a workmanlike manner," he said grimly, drawing back and offering the glass to Lieutenant Benson.

"Even that would be more endurable than sitting still and dying of starvation," rejoined Benson with the repressed savagery of a desperately hungry man.

"Call Jemadar Fateh Nikoo; it may be well to have his wisdom on the subject," said Captain Felton; and away went Benson, plunging down the stairs from the tower at a rate that threatened great risk to his neck, the steps being worn and broken, and almost unfit for use.

But no casualty occurred, and in an indescribably short space of time the young man returned with a lean, gaunt, native soldier with a bright-red turban bound about his head.

"Look yonder, Nikoo, and tell us what those beggars are up to now," said Captain Felton, handing the man his field-glass and pointing towards the clump of deodar trees.

But Jemadar Fateh Nikoo would not avail himself of this proffered aid to sight, and, kneeling down by the loophole, stared long and earnestly across the intervening valley to the Kajid camp.

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"Him Kajid-man gone home," he said in slow solemn tones after a prolonged stare. Although he was an officer in a Sikh regiment, Jemadar Fateh Nikoo was by no means noted for the use of correct English on the rare occasions when he condescended to clothe his ideas in that tongue.

"Gone, man? Are you sure?" demanded the captain in great excitement.

"No Kajid over there," returned Nikoo in the calm decisive manner that admits no suspicion of doubt.

"Hurrah! then the siege is raised!" cried Benson, flinging up his cap and capering like a school-boy.

"Don't be too sure about that. Take a look at the westward camp," said Dr. Perry in a cautious tone.

"No Kajid man anywhere," announced the confident jemadar, and at his words a lusty ringing cheer broke from the throats of the soldiers who had clambered up the stairs, the sooner to get the benefit of Nikoo's wisdom on the matter, he being noted for the possession of the keenest sight and soundest judgment of any native within the walls of the fort.

"Take twenty men and reconnoitre, but be wary. Remember Wasji-Nullah," said Captain Felton to the jemadar, who promptly complied, whilst the remainder of the garrison, venturing to show themselves at the loopholes and on the walls, watched breathlessly for some sign of the foe, or any indications of an ambush.

But Jemadar Fateh Nikoo made no mistake when he said that the Kajids had gone. A close inspec-

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tion of their camp showed not merely the fact of their departure, but also that their going had been premeditated and arranged for.

The day was spent in scouring the country round Alipahr for traces of the enemy, or indications of their line of retreat. The method of their departure was so unaccountable and incomprehensible that Captain Felton was suspicious of it, fearing lest the tragedy of Wasji-Nullah was to be repeated.

Leaving Lieutenant Benson in charge of the fort, he took a company of Sikhs and explored in one direction, the jemadar and his men going in another.

Alipahr stood at the end of a long valley running up into the hills, which, narrowing as it went, broke off into wild nullahs and lonely hollows, where an army might hide without being discovered. And it was these nooks and crannies of the hills that the lately-besieged garrison searched so carefully on that first day of their relief.

But no trace of any foe could they discover; and coming at length to the decision that the Kajids really had taken their departure, they were turning their faces back towards Alipahr once more when Captain Felton's men stumbled upon a sight which turned their rejoicing of the moment before into the keenest sorrow.

It was nearly sunset, and they had reached a bend in the nullah, where a solitary tree with big gnarled roots blocked the way. Passing round this they saw, to their horror and dismay, the bodies of two men lying on the side nearest Alipahr.

They had died fighting, apparently, for weapons

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lay scattered about in various directions, and the position of the corpses seemed to show that they had stood with their backs to the tree until overpowered and slain by their enemies.

For a moment the search party paused in a genuine start of surprise and dismay, then Captain Felton cried out in a shocked tone, "Good God, it is the major!"

"And that, sir, is poor Joe Brown," said one of the men, pointing reverently to the second corpse, which lay a little in front of the first, as though the private had given his own life in defence of his master's.

"James, Kite, and Sinclair, go back to the fort and bring the ambulance. We must carry the bodies there at once," commanded the captain in a sharp voice of authority; the sharper and the more authoritative because of the tragedy on which they had stumbled, for it was surely the sheerest perversity of fate to let the major get so close to Alipahr, and safety, and then to slay him there.

The men and their leader stood silent, grouped in a semicircle round the bodies, whilst they waited for the coming of the ambulance.

It was dark before the men arrived with two litters, and six men to each litter. The flaring torches of the soldiers cast weird lights and shadows over the solitary nullah, while the quick tramp of their trained feet caused yet weirder echoes to reverberate amongst the lonely hollows of the hills.

Silently and reverently they lifted the remains of their late commander, and just as reverently they gathered up the dead form of poor Joe Brown, for

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in the majesty of the great leveller, death, the men were equal.

Then came the solemn progress back to the fort, where preparations had been made to receive the bodies. Two graves were dug outside the main gate, where in times of peace the rhododendrons clustered thickly. Nothing but brown and blackened stumps now remained.

A few of the natives who had fled to the hills at the first approach of the Kajids had already returned to their homes, and gathered to witness the funeral of the sahib-major and his white servant.

In Major Boyd's pocket was found the first four lines of a letter to his wife, a fragment in pencil that had been scribbled probably during the journey from Rampoostan. Besides this, there was the rough draft of a letter which he intended to send when he gave in his papers, explaining the cause which compelled him to resign his commission. His watch, purse, and cigar-case had all disappeared, having probably been appropriated by the Kajids.

Joe Brown's pockets were empty, and the buttons had been torn from his jacket, an indignity which, for some unexplained reason, had been spared to the major, his master.

There were holes in their clothes where the bullets had passed, but they were all in front—a significant fact that, and a mute but reliable witness to the certainty that neither of them had made any attempt at retreat.

Failing coffins, the bodies were wrapped in sail-cloth and laid in the grave. Then with two soldiers to hold torches beside him, Captain Felton read the

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burial service; and some of their small remaining stock of ammunition was expended in firing a salute over the resting-place of their fallen officer and his servant. Then the graves were filled in, and the little company retired into the fort to wait for the morning.

There was none of the light-hearted joy that would naturally have come to them on their release from captivity. They did not even go beyond their half-rations for supper, although the deprivation of the past and the prospect of the future might have warranted a full meal on that night at least.

"So you have got your majority now, Felton, and surely never a man deserved promotion more," Dr. Perry said, as the two sat far into the night discussing the tragedy of the previous day and making plans for the one already begun.

"Yes; but the manner of getting it takes most of the pleasure from the step," returned the captain moodily.

"Poor Boyd! it is all the more sad for his children that his wife should be away in England now," the doctor said compassionately.

Captain Felton did not reply to this. Perhaps he had not so high an opinion of Mrs. Boyd as to enable him fully to sympathize with the doctor's feeling on this point.

"They are poor, too, shockingly poor," Dr. Perry went on, thinking of the stray bits of gossip his aunt had retailed to him concerning the financial condition of the major's household, and which, though unheeded, or perhaps even scoffed at then, came back to his memory now with all the force of conviction.

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"Sir Wyndham will not let them want, he is—" but Captain Felton drew himself up with a start, leaving his sentence unfinished. Perhaps he had not meant to say so much.

But his words only caused Dr. Perry to say, with a little smile of amusement playing for a moment over his face, "Oh, you have heard of the titled relation, have you? Poor Boyd! that baronet-uncle of his was the one weakness that he couldn't help airing, and he was so fond of talking about him! Yet what a good fellow he was, too!"

"I can't think what possessed him to travel almost alone like that. It was a reckless waste of a valuable life," Captain Felton said in a gloomy tone. The finding of the major's body had depressed him terribly, much more, indeed, than he cared to confess, for it awoke in him superstitious fears of more disaster to follow.

"I suppose that he was like a good many other folk, and didn't think there was any danger to speak of. It is astonishing how little attention some people pay to affairs like this, yet their neglect has cost kingdoms before to-day," returned the doctor.

Very little sleep had either of the two men that night, and dawn found both in the saddle. The beasts they bestrode were only miserable mules, the horses having for the most part died or been stolen by the border thieves, and none of those remaining were fit for the journey to Rampoostan.

The garrison turned out to cheer them on their departure, but the shouts had a hollow ring, for none knew what further disaster might be in store

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for them in the rickety old fort that was so scantily furnished with food and ammunition. And meanwhile the graves outside the gate were a mute witness to what had been, and a reminder of what might be again.

Nor were the hearts of those who rode away much lighter, for who could say what ambuscade might not await them on their way, or whether they might not find a worse state of affairs at the end of the journey than they had left at the beginning.

Their forebodings increased the further they went. Sacked and burned villages, the ruins of some of them still smoking, and the scared and frightened inhabitants, told their own tale of the track of the border thieves.

The only consolation they could gather was that, so far as they had come, at least, there was very little evidence of bloodshed. Here and there they found a corpse covered with wounds lying near some ruined dwelling, but, on the whole, plunder, and not slaughter, seemed to have been the object of the invaders.

All cattle, horses, and mules had been driven off by the raiders, and, being unable to get a change of steed by the way, it was noon on the following day before the little company reached the forlorn heap of ruins that had once been Chunderbah.

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CHAPTER XII.

LETTERS FROM HOME.

THE English mail was in, and the baboo at the post-office was reduced to the verge of despair by a new perplexity. In the weeks since the bridge broke down his trouble had been as to what to do with the accumulation of correspondence gathered in his office. Since, however, the river had become ferryable, and the congested mails—or at least the part of them which the white ants had spared—had been despatched, his anxieties had veered round to another point, and he became puzzled in an equal degree as to what should be done with the incoming mail.

It could not be delivered, for the simple reason that there was no one to deliver it to, most of the people having a stake in the contents of the mail-bag being absent from Rampoostan.

He was still absorbed with this difficulty of distribution, when Captain Felton and his party arrived in the town.

A curious hush was on the place when they rode in. The parroquets had fled before the first hint of winter cold, and that other robber, Lal Musjid, had fallen among greater thieves than himself, and had been carried away only three days before, when the band of Kajids had started with their prisoners for the hills.

Some of the shops and the principal bazaar had been not merely looted, but destroyed by fire, the

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blackened ruins showing clear and startling in the vivid light of morning a mile or more away from the town.

That same red road from Chunderbah led past the cemetery, and Captain Felton might have read the name on his wife's tombstone as he rode past, if he had thought of looking over the low hedge of tamarisk bushes skirting the inclosure.

The cemetery was two miles from the town, and nearer three by road, for the highway wound hither and thither in all sorts of tortuous twists and twirls until it came within a mile of the town, when, taking on new ways, it stretched straight as a tightened ribbon through fields, where the husbandmen were busy, right down to the principal bazaar.

It was then that they saw the blackened ruins ahead of them, and, urging their tired animals to their utmost speed, the party swept onward to the town. At first sight of the riders such people as still lingered about the place took to flight, but a second look, revealing the well-known uniforms of the soldiers, stayed their flying feet, and brought them as hastily back again to greet the arrivals from Alipahr.

And what a piteous tale of wrong and oppression they had to tell! Despoiled homes, sacked shops, battered and bruised bodies, and in not a few cases the hasty thrust of a keen-edged dagger or the yet more ready rifle-shot that had for ever settled the dispute of might versus right.

Brave soldier as he was, Captain Felton trembled, and his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth,

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when he would fain have enquired for his wife and child, and yet dared not through fear.

It was Dr. Perry who put the question, breaking in on the incoherent recital of the Kajid invasion and the frantic cries of, "Justice, Huzoor, justice upon the border thieves who have spoiled our homes and carried away our silver and gold, yea and our women and children also!"

"The ladies and children, where are they, the mem-sahibs, the missi-babas, and the chota-sahibs?"

"Alas! sahib-doctor, man of medicine, before whom the evil spirits quail and flee, was it to be expected the Kajids would spare those for whom the Kaiser-i-Hind would give gold in ransom?" cried the man closest to the doctor's stirrup—a washerman he was, but with one arm bound to the body with dirty bandages stained with dull-red blotches, significant of the character of the hurts hidden away underneath.

"Sahib, sahib, why did you tarry so long? Three days sooner, only three days, and the missi-baba would not have been torn away!" shrieked a woman in a ragged veil, pressing forward to reach the captain's side, and clutching frantically at his reins.

It was Chrissie's ayah, and Captain Felton reeled as though he would fall from his mule. "Your mistress, woman—where is the mem-sahib?" he demanded in a voice of thunder, finding his tongue now that the first of the shock had passed.

"The mem-sahib is dead these many days past; she died on the day when Lal Musjid seized upon the house of the Huzoor Major," cried Huyyud, pressing forward, and thrusting the ayah to one

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side, a woman's version of any story not being accounted worth listening to, when the voice of a man might be heard on the subject.

"Shut up, fool, idiot, if you've a grain of sense in your stupid head!" shouted the doctor angrily, making a drive at the indiscreet Huyyud with his riding-whip. But Huyyud dived quickly, and the blow caught the ayah on the shoulder, causing her to shriek with pain.

Captain Felton did not cry out, though the blow dealt to him was keener far, but, sitting erect in his saddle as a soldier should, he lifted his hat, saying in a solemn tone, "Poor Mary, at least she was spared this greater misery of having her child torn away from her. Let God's will be done!"

His tone was so tense and strained, that an involuntary hush dropped momentarily upon the turbulent crowd, stilling their cries for justice, and causing them to gaze in awed surprise at the white sahib, who took the blows of fate so calmly, and forebore to curse and swear as did most of the Huzoors of their acquaintance.

"Go on to the town with them, Perry. I am going back yonder first," Captain Felton said, with a wave of his hand towards the distant cemetery, and, wheeling his mule round, he urged the tired beast into a long loping trot backward over the road he had come.

Before he was out of ear-shot, the cries had broken forth again, and, clamouring still for justice on their oppressors, the crowd escorted the soldiers back to the town.

At first Dr. Perry felt inclined to rub his eyes

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under the impression that he was dreaming, and that this place could not be Rampoostan at all. The old landmarks might be there, but they were not apparent at first sight, and the burned and still burning buildings so greatly altered the character of the town, that he might fairly be excused his surprise and bewilderment.

"Why sit still and twirl your thumbs while the fire destroys what the Kajids have spared?" he shouted in an angry tone, pointing to the blackened, smoking ruins of the half-burned houses.

"Alas! alas! we have no homes, we have no houses, nothing remains to us, for they have carried the figure of Lukshmee from her shrine, and we are nought but Lukhee-chara (luckless)", cried one; whilst another shrieked in yet fiercer despair:

"The yellow one hath been stolen from her home, and her seat on the water-lily is empty, in her right hand she held the pashŭ of power, in her left a necklace of most wonderful brilliance, and worth a lakh of rupees."

"Justice, justice, restore to us our god and our homes!" was the reiterated cry filling up the pauses between the more articulate complaints, until the doctor began to wonder what the end of the clamour might be.

Yet they did not all scream and shout for vengeance on their oppressors; some, and these not the least impoverished either, crouched silently by the ruins of their homes, uttering no protest, voicing no complaint, but bearing misfortune with the same calm, unmoved stoicism with which they welcomed ease and prosperity.

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But the doctor was a man of resolution and despatch; and, dispersing the mob that had collected, he rode straight to the post-office, where, having obtained a telegraph form, he wrote a call for help to the next military station, another message to the colonel, who, for all he knew, might still be in Simla, and a third to Miss Ferrars, his aunt, who was staying in Bombay, begging her to write and break the news of the major's death to Mrs. Boyd in England.

These he sent by special messenger across the river, and along the line to Hussandabat, whence they could be telegraphed to their destinations.

When this was done, he set himself to discover what more there was to be known concerning the Kajid onslaught, writing down the names of the killed, and carefully making a list of such as had been carried away prisoners by the border thieves.

"Lal Musjid! and wherefore should they trouble to hold that old rogue at ransom, since no one cares a lacquered pot whether he ever comes back at all?" he exclaimed, when the usurer's name had been added to the others.

"He was dwelling in the bungalow of the Huzoor Major, from whence he had driven the missi-babas, and the Kajids would think he was well-beloved of Kaiser-i-Hind, and well worth the mule that was needed to carry him away," said Huyyud, who followed close after the doctor, and taking for the time the position of chief of the police, who had succumbed to the epidemic of malarial fever two weeks before.

"Then where did Miss Boyd and the major's children go?" demanded the doctor, his pencil held

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ready for the next name that was to be written, his ideas still in a fog concerning these latest developments in Rampoostan.

"They went to live in the sahib-captain's house; it was Missi Boyd who ministered to the poor mem-sahib when she died," explained Huyyud.

"Then where are they now?" demanded the doctor once more, though so well did he guess what the answer would be, that his pencil was already moving rapidly across the paper before Huyyud could frame a reply.

"Alas, and are they not prisoners in the hands of the Kajids, three days too late, only three days too late!" and he wrung his hands with a tragic gesture, which would have been worth a good deal on the stage of a fourth-rate theatre, but availed nothing here, for the doctor did not see it; he was too busy with his pencil just then.

"What were you about that you could not defend your master's daughter? Had you no knives, no daggers even by which you might have made those rascally thieves pay dearly for their impertinence?" cried Dr. Perry, ceasing to write, and brandishing his pencil wrathfully in Huyyud's face.

"The arm of one might not prevail against a multitude," retorted that worthy sulkily, not deeming it expedient to explain that he had carefully hidden from the possible risk of encounter among the bales and boxes stowed away under the back verandah, and remained there until the Kajids and their prisoners were clear of the town.

"Justice, justice!" shrieked the crowd.

"Vengeance on the enemy that hath desecrated

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our temples and despoiled our homes," cried the priests of Lukshmee, whose occupation for the nonce was gone.

But Dr. Perry waved them aside, saying that they should be attended to in due course, but that first he must rest his men, and send messages for help.

He was anxious about Captain Felton, and, procuring a fresh mule, set off towards the cemetery to see that his friend suffered no harm, for who could say that a wandering Kajid might not be lingering behind, lurking amid the thickets of tamarisk bushes in the place of the dead.

But his apprehensions proved groundless. A mile from the town, where the road began to twist and turn, he met Captain Felton returning on foot, and leading his mule, which had fallen dead lame, poor beast, and limped in a truly pathetic fashion.

In a few brief sentences Dr. Perry put him in possession of the situation, as he understood it, and tried, though with indifferent success, to comfort him concerning Chrissie.

"I should have been happier to know that she was lying yonder with her mother," Captain Felton said, with a backward inclination of his head towards the cemetery from which he had just come.

"Nonsense, man! you must be morbid indeed to think that harm would come to prisoners held at ransom," retorted the doctor impatiently, though at heart he was not quite so confident as on the surface he appeared to be.

"Who is to be sure of anything where rascals like that are concerned? They have no sense of truth or of honour in their composition."

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"Perhaps not. But one thing they have—call it a faculty if you like—and that is, a very keen appreciation of the almighty dollar, and an equally strong desire to enrich themselves in all possible ways and by all possible means. They are shrewd enough too, to know that they would get nothing if their prisoners were not treated properly; and you may rest assured that they won't run many unnecessary risks on that score."

"I wish I could feel certain of it," replied Captain Felton with a sigh; but his tone was now a trifle less hopeless than his words.

"It makes you think of Italian brigands, and would be very effective in a novel, though it strikes one as decidedly out of place in real life," said Dr. Perry, dismounting from his own mule and walking by the side of Captain Felton.

"That is just it. In a novel one might even be able to admire a situation of the kind, but when it comes to a man's own child—" the soldier did not finish his sentence, only strode on a little faster, putting down his feet with the sharp quick tread of a desperate man, and dragging at the bridle-rein, whilst the poor mule limped painfully behind.

"There are letters directed to Major Boyd, some of them from his wife are marked 'Immediate'. What are you going to do about them, Felton?" asked the doctor, just as they entered the town.

"Return them, of course; there is nothing else to be done, seeing that Miss Boyd is as inaccessible as—as—"

"Not as the major himself, if that is what you were going to say," broke in the doctor sharply.

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"There is little difference—or won't be in six months' time," replied the other in a dreary tone, staring fixedly before him at the blackened ruins of the principal bazaar.

Dr. Perry chose to ignore this speech, feeling it to be a waste of time and strength to combat a depression so hopeless. The first thing to be done was to stir the captain up to action, and his despair would vanish as a natural consequence.

"You will have to open those letters yourself. It is of the last importance, perhaps, that you should," he said with decision.

"I am not disposed to meddle with correspondence not intended for me. Why not do it yourself, if it must be done?" said Captain Felton in an unwilling tone.

"Because I am not at the head of affairs, either civil or military, whereas you are, Major Felton, or will be in due course," retorted the doctor, with a flourish.

The other man set his teeth hard. He was thinking of his wife lying yonder in the shade of the tamarisk bushes, and fancying how pleased she would have been at this unexpected promotion, sad as the cause for it had been. And after a moment's pause he said with a certain hardness in his tone: "Very well, if it must be done, it will be as well to get it over quickly."

The people gathered round them when they passed along the streets towards the post-office, but there was no clamouring for justice now. The Huzoors knew the trouble, and would set it straight in due course, if they were not disturbed mean-

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while. So the ripple of excitement which had stirred the town on the coming of the soldiers subsided into apathetic indifference.

The post-office baboo brought forth the mails, and offered the whole lot for Captain Felton's acceptance. He was visibly disappointed when the captain refused to take them, for it would have been a great relief to have had this burden lifted from his official conscience.

"Find me the letters directed to Major Boyd and which are marked 'Immediate'," said the captain, his manner betraying the distaste he felt at the task before him.

While the baboo, with much licking of dirty fingers, was sorting the piles of missives awaiting distribution, and liberally hall-marking them with native grease as he went along, Dr. Perry told the captain of Lal Musjid's seizure of the major's bungalow and effects; and also the fate which had overtaken the grasping old money-lender on his being found in possession of so much splendour.

"It is this which makes it so necessary that the letters should be opened, don't you see, for we can't possibly wind up the major's affairs until we know whether the money is here to repay that loan," the doctor said impressively.

"Lal Musjid had no right to foreclose under such conditions," replied the other decidedly.

"I am not so sure that he hadn't a legal right, seeing payment was so much overdue; and the moral aspect of the business wouldn't appeal to him, of course," Dr. Perry went on, with a shake of his head.

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"It is business for a lawyer," objected the unwilling captain, reluctant still, even though the baboo had just placed the letters in his hands.

"Hush, for pity's sake!" said Dr. Perry, looking round with an expression of alarm on his face. He was relieved to find that, although there were plenty of people lounging about, no one appeared to have heeded that most indiscreet utterance. Then he went on: "Have a care what you say, for Shan Dal Devi is hanging round, making good use of that one little eye of his, and if he can only get a finger in the business, you may guess how much will be left for the widow and orphans of poor Boyd."

Shan Dal Devi was a native lawyer—a shrewd, well-educated man, who had spent some years in England qualifying himself to rise in his profession. Just why, after all his labour and endeavour, he had settled down in a place like Rampoostan and hid his light under a bushel, did not clearly appear. By an accident he had lost one eye, but the other seemed to have gathered strength from the disaster, and for quick-sightedness, and a keen grasp of puzzling situations, Shan Dal Devi was unusually hard to beat.

Captain Felton raised no further objections; indeed he glanced as anxiously as Dr. Perry had done in the direction of the native lawyer, to make sure that his incautious words had not been overheard.

Glancing through the packet of lettters, he selected that which bore the earliest date, and slit the envelope open with his knife.

It was the first letter Mrs. Boyd had written after

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reaching her home in England, and contained direful news. Her father was not dead, but was bankrupt, and she was thus left without the means of repaying the money owing to Lal Musjid. She begged her husband to persuade the old usurer to wait a little longer, as she intended going at once to Evington Towers to beg the money of Sir Wyndham, who would scarcely refuse his intervention to save his nephew from the disgrace that would fall upon him if the story of his transaction with Lal Musjid became known.

Captain Felton put the letter back in its envelope and opened the next. It was terribly distasteful to him to penetrate into this Holy of Holies of domestic life, yet it had to be done.

This second letter was very brief, containing indeed little more than the announcement that Sir Wyndham's son was dead, and the major thus the next heir to the title and estates.

The captain put this aside with an impatient movement. "What did the woman want to write 'Urgent' and 'Important' upon her letters if they contained nothing more than details of this kind," he muttered, and, seizing upon the next, ripped it open with a savage air of utter exasperation.

The first thing that met his eyes was his own name at the top of the second page, and this is what he read:—

Since coming to the Towers I have made some quite astonishing discoveries, and about Captain Felton's family, too. The old man, his father, has a little land close to the Evington estate, and to rise

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in the world seems a characteristic of the family, for this Felton was reared by the parish, and started in life with the proverbial half-crown. I am thankful, indeed, that I never would know Mrs. Felton, or permit any intercourse between the two houses.

The missive dropped from the captain's fingers, and a heavy frown gathered on his face, so that Dr. Perry, observing it, cried in surprise:

"What is up now? More bad news?"

"You had better read the letter yourself; you will then be able to judge of my feelings," the other answered, picking up the next of Mrs. Boyd's epistles and ripping it open hastily, as though the act of tearing something soothed him in some inscrutable way.

Dr. Perry read the letter through in profound silence, lingering over the objectionable paragraph, and reading it again; then he said in a thoughtful kind of way:

"Well, that's a nice mean sort of letter, I must admit, though, of course, she never intended it for our eyes. But I say, Felton, what a glorious pull over her you have had, quite in the scriptural way, of heaping coals of fire on her head, too!" and he stroked his moustache with the air of a man who is greatly amused.

"It is quite true what she has said, but it is only half true—that is the exasperating part of it," Captain Felton went on, drawing himself up haughtily now, and looking his friend full in the face. "My old father was brought up by the parish,

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but it was owing to a technical flaw in the will of his father's aunt, whereby her money went to a distant cousin, instead of being used for the poor little orphan for whom it was intended. But after my father had left the workhouse, and several times doubled that same half-crown, the wrong was made right by the kinsman dying and leaving the whole of his money to my father. He repaid to the parish the amount expended on his maintenance, and afterwards bought the farm, where he has ever since lived."

"So, so! And in your own particular line you are every bit as proud as Mrs. Boyd?" laughed Dr. Perry.

"I am more just. I do not deal in half-truths," corrected the other.

"She is a woman, you know, and therefore, according to the savants, born without the veracious instinct. Moreover, she is a widow now, and so entitled to our pity."

Captain Felton said no more, but, drawing the enclosures from the envelope he had last opened, produced a banker's draft for a thousand pounds, and spread it out before the doctor.

'Whew! So she really sent it. Now, what do you propose to do in the matter?"

"I propose to do nothing. I have opened the letters and read them under protest. With this my responsibility ceases, or I pass it on to you, if you care to take it. But I am going to look for my child."

"Very well. I will stay here and act for the pair of you, but you must give me a written authority."

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Captain Felton seized on an ink-pot and pen, hastily writing the required permission, "to buy, sell, or withhold", to Reginald Perry, M.D. Then, pushing it aside with a fierce gesture, he said:

"And now I am going to find Chrissie and bring her home—or avenge her!"

CHAPTER XIII.

IN A HARD CASE.

GWEN was very ill; and Juliet spent anxious days, and no less anxious nights, endeavouring to keep the spark of life from flickering out entirely.

No doctor, no fire, no medicine, and painfully little food; these were the ills against which she had to contend in her nursing of the sick girl, and the wonder was that she did not fall ill herself and die from sheer inability to do anything else.

Every day a functionary of the Great Nom appeared, bearing a bag of meal and a pot of ghee, which were their rations for the next twenty-four hours, and beyond this meagre provision they had nothing but what Musef's liberality procured for them.

The man of Beshawur, who was the owner of the goat, the husband of Musef, and the proud father of Narudu, had a few fields to cultivate beside the big well on the southern side of Ramoor. This man, Busshu, was an industrious fellow, toiling hard to keep his fields in tillage, and pay his dues of service to the rajah, who levied his taxes in kind, and not

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in cash like more civilized potentates. Busshu had to draw so much water daily for the irrigation of the palace gardens; and as, at that particular time, oxen, or indeed any sort of beast of burden, chanced to be at a premium in Ramoor, owing to the warfare on the frontier, Busshu had to get the water up by sheer strength of arm, his only helper being the goat, for Musef's hands were full with hoeing and weeding, to say nothing of such purely domestic labours as cooking her husband's food and tending little Narudu.

The nights were often bitterly cold, with rain, or even frost and snow. But in the daytime, when the sun shone hot and bright into the stuffy alley of the Highway of the Sacred Ox, the two tiny rooms composing their habitation grew so unbearably close and warm that Juliet was compelled to send Chrissie and Jessie out to the fields with Wyn in search of the healthful fresh air denied to them in the town.

Both girls were only too thankful for these opportunities of getting out of the noisome little house, and, having nowhere else to go and absolutely nothing to do, usually wended their way to Busshu's fields, where they took their share of hoeing and weeding under Musef's tuition, whilst Wyn and Narudu tumbled about on the ground in company, where they clawed the dirt, fought each other, or went to sleep, according as inclination prompted.

One morning, when Gwen was creeping slowly back to convalescence, Musef stepped out from the little house opposite with a very frightened, anxious look upon her face.

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Juliet was working their daily allowance of millet-meal into little flat cakes by mixing the meal with ghee, and Chrissie was laboriously sweeping out the room with a bunch of dried grass for a broom, when Musef came towards them with outstretched, beseeching hands.

"It is Busshu; he is sick, he cannot stir from his mat on the floor. Come to him and tell me what aileth him, wise, white mem-sahib from beyond the hills," she cried, wringing her hands and moaning with fear, for a sick husband is no joke in Beshawur, where the sweat of one's brow is the commonest coin in circulation, and, failing it, a man is quickly bankrupt: while if he dies, his wife has to go into a sort of penal servitude to the rajah, unless she has relatives rich enough to pay her service dues and buy her quittance from the state.

"I will come certainly; but, Musef, have you no medicine-men or even wise women in all this city of Ramoor?" Juliet asked, as she dusted the meal from her hands, taking care to waste none in the process, for the rajah's rations were not sufficiently liberal in quantity to leave a margin for possible loss.

Musef shook her head despondently.

"Good white mem, there are none so wise as thou art. Kotegurhu, who dwelleth in the way of the big temple, is learned in agues, but Busshu hath no ague, though he shivers and is hot like the missi-baba yonder;" and she nodded in the direction of Gwen, who, propped up in a corner of the room, was trying to take a languid interest in her aunt's cake-making, though secretly her whole soul was

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in revolt against the coarse unsavoury fare to which they were reduced.

"If it is only influenza I may be able to help him," Juliet said with a sort of dreary patience, as she followed Musef over the rough stones of the narrow roadway to the tiny house opposite.

It was high festival at the temple of the Sacred Ox that day, and the narrow alley was thronged with devout worshippers going and coming from the temple. The greater number of these wore strings of flowers or even leaves around their necks, giving them a ludicrous aspect, although the decorations appeared to afford them considerable gratification.

Juliet had, however, little time to spend in gazing at the passers-by just then, being fully occupied with Busshu, who lay in an almost unconscious condition, moaning constantly.

His symptoms were very similar to Gwen's, and there seemed nothing for it but to prescribe the same remedies, which were simple enough, and consisted mainly in keeping the patient warm, and applying hand-friction to the aching limbs.

Busshu was lying in the outer room, exposed to every draught that blew, and numberless other discomforts as well. For a moment Juliet entertained the idea of having him moved to the little inner apartment, but, having put her head in at the hole by which it was entered, abandoned that project at once, deciding that Busshu might as well die from draughts in the outer room, as be killed by asphyxia in the inner chamber.

So she told Musef to bring the biggest mat the

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house contained, and, hanging it from some hooks in the roof, made a curtain to shelter the corner where the sick man lay. This she fastened down by standing the image of Lukshmee upon it; and shelter, with partial privacy, being thus secured, she was able to turn her attention to Busshu himself.

Thanks to Musef's thrift and housewifely habits, the tiny house was not so bare as Juliet's abode across the way. A rug or two of native workmanship, and some dilapidated cushions, the cast-off property of one of the rajah's wives, made it possible to bolster up the invalid with some degree of comfort. Then, directing Musef how to apply hand-friction with the best effect on the aching limbs of the sufferer, she was turning away to go back to Gwen, when a great commotion and shrieking in the street startled her.

The narrow way was entirely blocked by an eager and excited crowd, which thronged into the street from both ends and appeared to be clamouring over something that had but just attracted its attention.

Juliet's first anxious thought was for her own house over the way, but as the crowding faces were all turned in her direction, the attraction must without doubt be on this side of the way.

"What is it, Musef; what is the matter with them all?" she cried, drawing back in alarm, for the mouthing, mowing crowd were struggling close up and almost into the little room where Busshu was lying sick.

Musef scrambled up from beside her prostrate husband, and, drawing her veil modestly over her

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face, peeped round the curtain on to the throng of excited people.

"It is the Lukshmee, and they worship, for is she not the goddess of prosperity and good luck, the yellow one who sitteth on the water-lily!" cried Musef, clapping her hands in childish glee, but shrinking back notwithstanding, for the women of Ramoor, though not secluded, were yet not willing to show themselves unduly before the gaze of men.

Juliet shrank back with her, whilst the noise and the tumult grew.

"I wish I had never put the image there, but it did so splendidly to keep the curtain down," sighed Juliet, as she crouched with the other women in the corner out of sight of the worshippers. "Could I take it away now, do you think?"

"Ah no! wise mem-sahib, the people would shout that prosperity was stolen away from them. The Lukshmee must stay there to bestow blessings on those who worship, or they will fall upon us and tear us in pieces."

"Then she shall be covered. They will pass on their way perhaps if her face is hidden, and this noise is certainly not good for Busshu," Juliet said, jumping up and seizing a big red cloth that Musef had tucked about her husband.

With this in her hand she stepped forward, boldly confronting the surging mob, and crying out in the best Urdu of which she was capable, "Hush! good people, and be silent, for it pleaseth Lukshmee to be purdah now," threw the red cloth over the image, hiding it from the eyes of the worshippers.

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A howl of rage broke from the angry throng, but she stood her ground steadily and without flinching.

"Uncover, uncover! Lukshmee shall not be hidden from us!" they shouted with one voice, their gestures full of menace for the slight woman's figure that was daring to interpose between them and the goddess they desired to worship.

"Lukshmee is purdah, she hath decreed it so, and who shall withstand her?" cried Juliet, raising her voice to a scream to pierce the din made by the mob, and plunging her arms aloft as if in an ecstasy of fanaticism.

The effect on the crowd was instantaneous; the noise was stilled as though by magic, and the mob thinned with amazing rapidity.

"Lukshmee is purdah; her priestess hath spoken it," they murmured, each one to his fellow, and then went their way.

When the congested traffic had subsided a little, Juliet hurried across the road to her own abode, expecting to find the girls and Wyn half-dead with fright.

Instead, they were in a state of uproarious merriment, laughing and clapping their hands in great glee; even Gwen had struggled to her feet, and, leaning on Chrissie, craned her neck to see the spectacle.

"What is it? Why are you laughing so much?" asked Juliet, who had been moved in the direction of fear rather than mirth herself.

"We are laughing at you, Aunt Juliet. Oh, you did look too funny standing up there beside that idol and waggling your arms about!" said Jessie,

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going off in a fit of laughter again at the recollection of her aunt's comical attitude.

Juliet flushed hotly and was silent. She was very sensitive, and keenly alive to ridicule. She had acted on impulse from a strong desire to secure quiet for the sick man, and her little stratagem had succeeded even beyond her expectations. But in the reaction she suffered intensely, and would fain have hidden herself had hiding been possible.

The others had no idea of the torture their merriment gave her, and continued to discuss the scene with great amusement, until Chrissie and Jessie carried Wyn off into the sunshine, and Musef took Narudu with her to her toil in the fields, leaving Juliet with the two invalids to care for.

The little excitement seemed to have had a beneficial effect upon Gwen, and she was quite cheerful and hopeful all through the day, declaring constantly that it could not be long now before their rescue was effected. Juliet began insensibly to gather hope too, and so the weary day passed on.

Busshu was no better at nightfall, and the only comfort Juliet could give to the sorrowing Musef was that he was no worse. The patient wife had done her hard field-work, and even drawn the water that was Busshu's due to the rajah, though in this latter task she had been aided by Chrissie, who spun the ancient wheel round with true British energy, which, if persisted in, might have caused a revolution in the labour market of Ramoor.

That night was a hideous experience. The priests from the temple of the Sacred Ox, discovering that a rival deity was on show in the street outside

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their gates, were naturally jealous, and afraid that their own interests might suffer. And as soon as darkness fell, they formed into procession, each one carrying a lighted cresset in one hand and a trumpet made of a ram's horn in the other.

Thus equipped they marched up and down the alley, blowing blasts on their trumpets that might have served to bring the walls of ancient Jericho down, whilst the crowd of onlookers added liberally to the noise by beating upon tom-toms to a running accompaniment of shrieks and yells.

Soon after this disturbance began, some of the mob, either from a spirit of defiance to the priests, or from a desire to quicken the riot, reached in over the front of Busshu's dwelling and twitched away the red cloth that hid the Lukshmee from the gaze of her adorers.

Then indeed the tumult waxed louder and louder, until a free fight was raging up and down the whole length of the alley, from the temple gates to where it merged into the main street of the city.

Juliet was in a state of panic, and had retreated with the girls and Wyn to the tiny inner room, where, barricading the entrance, they crouched in fear and trembling.

"Oh, Aunt Juliet, if only you had left that stupid old idol alone!" whimpered Jessie reproachfully.

"I never gave a thought to its being an object of worship, and it fixed that curtain down so beautifully!" sighed Juliet meekly, too much crushed by this new trouble to check the complaining of her niece.

"If Chrissie had never been silly enough to buy

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the old thing of Lal Musjid and give it to Busshu, it would not have been here in Ramoor at all," put in Gwen with severity, and going back to what she deemed the fountain-head of the trouble.

"You forget one thing, Gwen," put in Juliet quickly. She could defend others, though she had no spirit to defend herself. "If Chrissie had never laid Busshu under obligation, you at least must have perished from want since we have been in Ramoor, for you could not have eaten meal cakes and ghee when you were so ill."

Gwen was effectually silenced by this reminder, and, it is to be hoped, convinced as well, although her antagonism to Chrissie seemed strong enough to force its way through everything in the way of kindness and favour that was heaped upon it by the forgiving nature of the person most concerned.

But if Gwen was silenced, Jessie was not, and her reproaches and complainings lasted as long as the riot outside; and if they were not so loud they were at least, being at close quarters, more unendurable.

In the hush that fell upon the alley with the coming of daylight, Juliet ventured to look out from their hiding-place to see how much of the disturbance the dawning might show.

The Highway of the Sacred Ox was strewn from end to end with fragments of broken cressets, fluttering remnants of torn draperies, disabled trumpets, battered turbans, and other debris of the fray.

But it was the little house opposite that, after all, had suffered most, and Juliet gave a cry of alarm at

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seeing the ruin that had been wrought there, for it was literally torn to pieces, even the roof having been battered in by the ill-judged zeal of some temple fanatic.

And Busshu, Musef, and Narudu, where were they? The very thought of the grim possibilities of the case turned Juliet faint and sick with fear.

Of this, however, she could not speak to the others, but, bidding them come out from the noisome hole where they had spent the night, she busied herself in such preparations for breakfast as her very limited means permitted.

Musef had given Chrissie a leaf of curds on the previous evening, and a handful of lentils. The curds were reserved for Gwen, who could not eat the coarser fare on which the others were compelled to exist; and the lentils, having been pounded between two stones and soaked in water, were the only breakfast fare in the house. Not a very satisfactory meal, as it had to be taken uncooked, but better than the alternative of nothing.

Usually the bag of meal and pot of ghee arrived at dawn, but this morning it had not come; and Juliet was wondering in great trepidation what would become of them if this frail barrier between them and actual starvation should be removed, when four tall figures, clad in red petticoats and blue veils, appeared in front of the house, each carrying a tray piled with food.

These they offered on bended knee to Juliet, who took them thankfully enough, asking in tremulous tones to whom she was indebted for so much kindness.

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But the four figures only prostrated themselves as though in devotion, falling on their knees simultaneously, and rising in the same manner, as if they were puppets pulled with a string.

Then they departed as silently as they had come, backing out from the little house in a manner worthy of a court drawing-room, and leaving the inmates in a condition of bewildered surprise.

"What does it mean?" asked Juliet, gazing helplessly from one to the other of the girls.

"It means—oh, happiness!—that we have something fit to eat at last," cried Gwen, stretching out an eager hand for the dates and figs with which one of the trays was piled.

"And the sweetmeats! Did you ever see anything so delicious?" exclaimed Jessie, whose long abstinence from saccharine delights did but give her a keener relish for them.

"Try these cakes, Miss Boyd, they will take the taste of that awful ghee out of your mouth," mumbled Chrissie, who was very busy helping herself, and feeding Wyn between whiles.

How much they enjoyed that breakfast no one can fully realize who had not existed for a few weeks on millet-meal and ghee, with a handful of soaked lentils for variation. But even while they were in the enjoyment of the unexpected dainties, Juliet was wondering, with secret misgivings, what had happened to the little family over the way.

The others wondered too, only they seemed to have no misgivings on the subject, such at least as troubled her.

Chrissie supposed they had taken flight when

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they found the house being pulled about their ears, and Jessie grumbled a little that Musef should have gone without a word to let them know where they might find her.

"Perhaps she couldn't help it, poor thing!" said Chrissie the compassionate; "and she might even have thought that we had gone too, seeing that we were packed into that awful hole at the back."

"Someone must have carried Busshu, for I am sure he could not have walked if he was as ill as Aunt Juliet said," put in Gwen decidedly.

"Shall we take Wyn out to the fields to-day, Miss Boyd?" asked Chrissie; "then we should see if Musef was there."

"Not to-day, Chrissie; I don't think I could endure to have any of you out of my sight," said Juliet with a shiver.

"What are you afraid of, Aunt Juliet?" asked Jessie. "Do you think the Great Nom will hold us responsible for all that row last night?"

But Juliet's reply was drowned in the sudden noise of trumpets and tom-toms sounding at the corner of the narrow alley.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WUZEER'S TRIBUNAL.

"SHALL we hide again, Aunt Juliet?" asked Gwen tremblingly, as the noise came nearer and nearer.

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"No, dear, we cannot always remain hidden; it may be better to face it out at once. Besides, anyone could enter that hole if they were so inclined, seeing that there is no door," Juliet answered, her own heart sinking at the sounds of an approaching crowd.

It was an orderly crowd this time, however, and she gathered courage from the fact, as the first part of it came into sight, consisting of runners clad in the palace livery of madder and blue, with high-peaked caps of sheepskin. After these came the musicians, whose efforts evoked more discords than harmony, and after them, the Great Nom himself, enthroned upon a mule, his ample petticoats arranged with a view to showing as much of their fringed decorations as possible.

Arrived opposite the house, he made a sign for the musicians—save the mark!—to suspend operations, and then, without descending from his mule, he bent his head lower, in order to look into the house, and said in a pompous tone:

"Woman-of-the-froward-tongue, stand forth and answer concerning the riot and bloodshed of last night."

"Don't move, Miss Boyd, let him learn to be civil," cried Chrissie indignantly.

But Juliet had no desire to irritate the little man further, and came forward out of the shadow, confronting him with a quiet courage that dignified her in spite of her surroundings, and the shabby, ragged gown that hung about her in a dreary misfit.

"I had no part in the tumult of the night," she

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said, speaking with calm decision, and looking steadily at the wizened face under the jewelled cap.

"I tell thee that is false, woman-of-the-froward-tongue. Art thou not a priestess of that money-loving goddess, Lukshmee, the yellow one, whose throne is the water-lily, and didst thou not put her up to be worshipped at the very gate of the temple that is set apart as the dwelling of the Sacred Ox? Answer me, woman-of-the-ready-tongue."

"I am no priestess of Lukshmee, but an English woman, and a worshipper of the one true God, who made the earth, and the sky, and who fashioned you, Mr. Wuzeer, out of the common dust of the earth," Juliet answered as fearlessly as ever, whilst the girls crouched about her, and Wyn set up a howl of dismay.

The Great Nom frowned, he hated the noise of children crying, and Wyn usually greeted him with an exhibition of this sort.

"Ramoor is the City of God," he answered, when Chrissie had silenced Wyn by stuffing his mouth full of sweetmeats, and thus secured a hearing for the wuzeer, "and within its gates the worship of a goddess may not be endured."

"I do not worship Lukshmee," Juliet repeated in indignant denial.

"Yet it was thy hand that placed the idol, the visible form of the false one, in the front of yonder dwelling;" and he pointed with a flourish across the way to the ruined house, where Busshu and Musef had had their home.

"I did not put it there with any idea of its being

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worshipped, but simply to hold down the curtain that protected the sick man from the draughts," she answered so earnestly, that the angry face of the wuzeer softened slightly, and he might eventually have been brought to believe her innocent of any intention to disturb the peace of the town, but for the untimely intervention of the priests of the Sacred Ox.

These men, in tattered, blood-stained garments, and wildly dishevelled hair, rushed forward from the background, and, casting themselves on the earth before the wuzeer, screamed for vengeance on the pale-faced foreigners who had wrought such mischief in the town.

At sight of the cruel faces, and fierce menaces of the priests, the girls began to cry, clinging closely to Juliet, whilst Wyn, who had finished his sweetmeats and wanted more, joined a lusty note to the general wailing.

The Great Nom's face hardened into a scowl, and the moment of mercy was past.

"Woman-of-the-froward-tongue, it is our pleasure no longer to permit thee within these gates. Henceforward thou shalt be lodged without the walls, where the jackals prowl in search of prey, and the hyena stalketh in the nighttime."

Juliet was conscious of a great throb of relief and satisfaction at the sentence, for life within the walls had been no very roseate experience, and to live without the gates would at least ensure the benefit of more fresh air. She was too wise, however, to show all she felt, and instead replied to the Great Nom in a serious tone, "We came not to

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Ramoor of our own free-will, but were dragged hither as captives. Think you not, Mr. Wuzeer, that Kaiser-i-Hind will require us at your hands, safe, and in good health likewise?"

The Great Nom snorted contemptuously, and kicked his mule so furiously that the creature jumped and plunged, to the great risk of the priests, grovelling still in the narrow roadway. "When Kaiser-i-Hind sendeth money for ransom, then will it be time enough for thoughts of safety and health. Meanwhile it is the pleasure of his Serene Excellence the Rajah of Beshawur, whose humble representative I am, that you abide without the gate, no longer being fed with meal and ghee from the palace stores."

"But we shall starve, lacking the dole of meal, since we have no means of procuring food for ourselves," protested Juliet, wringing her hands in dismay, as she thought of the children clinging to her.

The wuzeer smiled in a sardonic fashion, pointing to some of the dainties still remaining from their morning feast. "Food there is, neither millet-meal nor ghee, get more whence that comes from; and on bended knee rejoice that life is spared unto thee."

Juliet was silent from sheer inability to reply to this malignant taunt, and in a moment the trumpets began again, followed by the tom-toms, the priests scrambled to their feet in order to avoid being trodden to death under the feet of the mules, and, backing his steed slowly down the alley, the Great Nom departed as he had come, with the

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slight difference that this time he went tail-end first.

"Don't cry so much, girls, I can't think," said Juliet in a worried tone. Her head was aching so badly that the noise of this sobbing was more than she could bear.

"But we shall starve, Aunt Juliet. And oh, you've no idea how awful it will be without the walls at nighttime! I am so afraid to be in the dark alone!" wailed Jessie, her lamentations growing even louder than before.

"We sha'n't starve. I will draw water for the women when they come to the well. Don't you remember, Jessie, how we spun that old wheel round yesterday?" Chrissie said, a ready smile quivering out through her undried tears.

"Aunt Juliet, shall I have to walk to the gates; I don't believe I can?" Gwen asked in a piteous tone; and Juliet had to comfort her as best she could.

But the hours passed on without any intimation from the authorities that their exodus was to begin. And, worn out with the enforced vigil of the previous night, they slumbered fitfully, pending the execution of the rajah's pleasure.

There was little or no traffic through the Highway of the Sacred Ox that day. Religious enthusiasm, which had reached boiling point yesterday, was scarcely lukewarm to-day. Some other attraction had arisen, perhaps, or it might have been that the struggle for existence was too severe to admit of overmuch devotion to the deity enshrined within the temple walls.

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One person, however, found his way up the noisome, filthy alley in the silence and desertion of the noontide, when all the inhabitants were either asleep or away in the fields. This was Lal Musjid, usurer and idolmonger, whom the Kajids, having found dwelling in state in the house of Major Boyd, had taken prisoner under the mistaken impression that he was a person of importance for whom a heavy ransom would be paid.

Slowly and carefully he was picking his way along the dirty, rag-strewn street, when Jessie, who happened to be awake, espied him approaching, and immediately announced the fact in a loud tone to the others.

"Don't make such a noise, Jessie, he will hear what you are saying," expostulated Chrissie in a warning tone.

"It will do him good perhaps to hear a candid unbiassed opinion just for once," retorted Gwen crossly. She had been very comfortably asleep, and by no means approved of the disturbance.

"I don't think it could be called an unbiassed opinion, seeing the provocation to prejudice that we have had," Juliet said languidly, sitting up and peeping from the open front of the house at Lal Musjid approaching.

"He's coming here, Aunt Juliet!" exclaimed Jessie, in a stage-whisper this time, but which must have been plainly audible to the individual in question, as he came on with slow, halting steps and a painful limp that considerably retarded his progress.

"We can't shut the door in his face, because there

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isn't one to shut. Shall we tell him to go away, Miss Boyd?" asked Chrissie.

"No, let him come; he may have something to tell us," replied Juliet, a flutter of hope at her heart of tidings of succour near at hand.

Arrived in front of the house, Lal Musjid performed a series of salaams of such extraordinary extravagance and humility that Jessie and Chrissie were reduced at once to a condition verging on hysterics from suppressed laughter.

"The mem-sahib is gracious and ready to forgive," whined the old usurer when his ceremonial of greeting had been performed to his own satisfaction.

"I do not pretend to anything special in the matter of virtue, and your treatment of us did not tend to make us entertain any very high opinion of your kindness either; but if you have brought us any good news, why, I think, out of sheer gratitude, we shall find it easy to forgive even you, Lal Musjid," replied Juliet, looking at the dirty, ugly old man on whose countenance avarice, greed, and lust of gain were all writ so plainly.

"The news is good for you—for you and those in captivity with you—but for me, alas! it is but to seal my doom," he said, smiting on his breast, and groaning in anguish of soul.

"Good news, and for us? Oh tell it quickly, quickly!" cried Gwen, scrambling to an upright position, and forgetting half her weakness in her excitement.

Lal Musjid turned to her and salaamed until his long beard swept the ground.

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"The missi-baba will incline her heart in pity towards the unfortunate worm who crawls in the dust at her feet?" he asked, imagining for a sanguine moment that her heart might be softer than Juliet's.

"What do you want? Tell us your news first, and then say what you want us to do for you," said Gwen in the sharp, dictatorial tone she had learned from her mother.

"Kaiser-i-Hind hath remembered her white children in their captivity, and hath sent a messenger with a tongue of mingled fire and steel, warning these hill barbarians of the judgments she will call down upon them unless these same captives are at once restored in peace and honour. But the White Queen hath forgotten her most faithful subject, Lal Musjid, of whom there is no mention in the message of fire and of steel;" and again he groaned bitterly, beating his breast with his hands.

"Oh be joyful! We are going home, home, home!" cried Jessie, jumping up and waltzing about the tiny room, where, as might be expected, she speedily fell foul of an obstacle, and came crashing down on Chrissie, who sat in the corner nursing Wyn.

An indignant exclamation from Chrissie, whose toes had been severely pounded, and a howl from Wyn, who was frightened and decidedly inconvenienced by this sudden descent of his sister upon him, deadened for a moment the sounds of Lal Musjid's piteous pleading.

But he was in real earnest, and persisted until he gained a hearing once more.

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"If the favoured children of the White Queen would but remember the poor old man left behind in captivity, then would he restore the things he has taken from them, and the money of the loan should be as though it had never been paid."

"Do you really mean that if we could get you back to Rampoostan in safety, you would forgive father all that money he borrowed from you and could not repay?" demanded Gwen, who was shrewd and businesslike, and not above driving a bargain when opportunity offered.

"Yes, yes, put me safe in Rampoostan, the place of mine abode, then, then will I give to thee, daughter of the sun, a quittance from the debt that rests so heavily upon thee," he replied with panting eagerness.

"But we shouldn't have to pay the money if you didn't come back at all, should we?" asked Jessie.

Lal Musjid smiled, if such a contortion deserved the name. If I remain in Ramoor, these Kajid soldiers of the Great Nom will kill me at their next festival of the Sacred Ox, and Shan Dal Devi, who holdeth my will, made after the manner of the Huzoors, will act upon it and take the value of the loan, and the interest accruing therefrom, even to the uttermost anna and pice."

"And won't this man, Shan Dal Devi, interfere on your behalf, and get you released?" inquired Gwen.

Lal Musjid drew his face into a still more unpleasant grimace of amusement.

"Is not the heart of man by nature inclined unto evil? If I am offered up as a sacrifice on the altar

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of the Sacred Ox, or crushed to death before the gods of the big temple, then will all my stores of rupees, my gems and precious stones, become the property of that man of mine own blood, Shan Dal Devi," he said, his voice rising to a thin shriek of dislike and hate as he thought of the kinsman who would benefit by his death.

"Will you give us a paper to say the loan need not be paid if we restore you in safety to your home?" asked Gwen.

"No, no, Gwen, such a thing would be an abominable injustice," broke in Juliet hurriedly; and turning to Lal Musjid, she continued in the same tone of feverish haste, "We are indeed grateful to you for bringing us tidings of such good cheer, and if we live to reach Rampoostan in safety, we will certainly do all that lies in our power to procure your release also. But go away now, please, and if you hear any further news let us know as soon as you can."

Lal Musjid salaamed in token of obedience, for Juliet was peremptory and not to be gainsaid; but as he turned away, he said in a low tone to Gwen:

"The missi-baba shall have the paper before she leaves the City of God."

"Gwen, how could you try to drive such an utterly infamous bargain with that detestable old man?" cried Juliet angrily, as, ragged, filthy, and in appearance unutterably mean, the idolmonger shuffled his way down the alley and out to the open street once more.

Gwen tossed her head defiantly. "I am not a

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baby, Aunt Juliet; indeed in many things I am more capable of managing wisely than you yourself. I am sure you would never have thought of insisting on having Lal Musjid's promise down in black and white."

"I am sure of that also. Oh, Gwen, how can you be so mercenary?" cried Juliet, with very unusual scorn and irritation.

"Gwen, it was absolutely caddish of you!" exclaimed Chrissie, in a sudden outburst of indignation.

"You—you call me caddish?" shrieked Gwen, in a perfect frenzy of rage, and looking ready to fly at Chrissie.

"Be quiet, Gwen, the Great Nom will think we are getting up another insurrection," admonished Jessie, who was always afraid of her sister in these fits of passionate rage.

But Gwen paid no heed to her; indeed, so exceedingly angry was she as to be past heeding anyone, as she screamed vituperations at the offending Chrissie, shaking her clenched fists, and looking like one of the furies.

In vain Juliet besought and commanded her to be calm. She continued to shriek incoherent abuse at the offender, until compelled by exhaustion to desist, when she subsided into piteous weeping, in which she was ably seconded by Wyn.

By this time Chrissie and Jessie were crying too, while Juliet sat in a corner resting her head against the wall, apparently in too much pain to interfere in the interests of greater cheerfulness.

"Aunt Juliet, I'm so sorry, please forgive me,"

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murmured Gwen, penitent and subdued, some half-hour later.

"It is Chrissie's forgiveness that you have to ask, not mine," retorted Juliet coldly.

To this Gwen made no reply, but twisting herself round into a more comfortable position, went to sleep. Plainly, if she was sorry, she was not yet sorry enough to ask pardon of one so much beneath her in social status as she deemed Chrissie to be.

The others sat on in dreary patience. There was hardly sufficient hope remaining in their hearts to give them faith in the tidings of speedy rescue that Lal Musjid had brought to them, and yet it was that same belief, intangible and half-acknowledged though it was, that kept them from despair, and enabled them to endure the misery of the lagging hours as they passed.

The provisions of the morning had all been eaten, saving two small portions set aside for Gwen and Wyn. They had no water even, for Juliet had not liked to let Chrissie and Jessie go to the well, fearing lest the emissaries of the Great Nom should appear to execute his commands while they were away, and that thus they might miss each other and be separated.

Once or twice Chrissie had ventured to steal down the alley to the main street with a water-jar in her hand that Musef had given her, to beg a supply of some kind-hearted bhisti, who might chance to be passing.

But though she accosted several, they all shook their heads and passed on, the water-carriers of Ramoor being to a man the devotees of the Sacred

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Ox, and thus inclined to view, with suspicion and dislike, these white strangers who had identified themselves with Lukshmee. Of this Chrissie of course knew nothing, and came back to crouch beside the others in the squalid little room, and bear the discomforting thirst as best she could.

Towards sunset the narrow alley became alive with the footsteps and voices of the toilers returning from the fields. Children shouted, goats bleated, and strings of cattle meandered in and out of the narrow streets and alleys of the town. But none of the passers-by looked or spoke to the group of sad-faced strangers sitting in the small house opposite to Busshu's ruined dwelling. Perhaps they did not dare, for the wuzeer, however incompetent and small-minded he might be, was a person of very great importance and influence in Ramoor, more dreaded because better known than even the rajah himself, and ruling with the tyranny of a despot.

Wyn had crept to his usual shelter in Chrissie's arms, and dropped into peaceful slumber; Gwen also was asleep, and Juliet dozed fitfully, although the pain in her head hardly allowed her to lose consciousness. By this time darkness had fallen, and although beyond the city, in the open country, the moon was shining brightly, in the Highway of the Sacred Ox it was so dark that it was impossible to see anything except the nearest objects, and even these were uncanny and indistinct in the gloom.

Then it was that a veiled, shrouded figure crept cautiously down the narrow way. It was the figure of a woman, heavily laden, and carrying a lighted cresset to show where the deepest pitfalls lay.

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Chrissie, who was wide awake and watchful, saw the tiny flickering light, and wondered whether the owner would pass their house or step into one lower down. But on she came, the light swaying this way and that, as its bearer made detours to avoid the holes in the pathway, until she paused at last close to where Chrissie was sitting with Wyn cuddled up in her arms.

"Is the missi-baba well?" asked a familiar voice, at the sound of which Chrissie gave a start of delight and surprise, crying out joyfully, "Oh, Musef, is it really you?"

"Hush, hush! the missi-baba must not cry out, or the Sacred Ox will hear, and he will trample under the feet of him, not Musef alone, but Busshu and the little Narudu, together with the wise mem-sahib, the missi-babas, and the chota-sahib," she replied, holding up a dusky hand as an admonition to silence.

"I will be quiet. Only tell me, Musef, how did you escape last night, and how is poor Busshu?" whispered Chrissie eagerly, as Juliet stirred in her uneasy slumber, and, awaking with a moan, asked in a troubled voice what was the matter.

"Does the missi-baba thirst, and is she hungry?" demanded Musef in her soft voice, setting the cresset on an angle of the wall, and proceeding to unburden herself of the heavy load she carried, slung from her shoulders or hung under her arms.

"Have you brought us food and drink?" Here a sob got in the way of Chrissie's utterance, and she choked and gasped in a great effort to keep it down.

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"Something to eat, did you say, Chrissie Felton, or was I dreaming?" said Jessie, coming out of her slumber with a wide yawn, and staring at Musef and the flaring light of the cresset in great astonishment.

"Lukshmee doth not forget her children, and where she dwelleth there doth prosperity come," Musef went on in soothing tones, as she set before them little platters of curds, crisp cakes, and tempting fruits.

Juliet lifted her heavy head and gazed at them with uncomprehending, lack-lustre eyes. "What is it? Have the ravens come again?" she asked.

"What ravens, Aunt Juliet? I haven't seen one since we have been in Beshawur, though there are plenty of crows," said Jessie in mumbling tones, for her mouth was very full of honey and curds.

Juliet moved her head to and fro in a puzzled fashion, and she answered, as if in surprise that the question had ever been asked, "Those ravens that came this morning, and all the days since we have been here. 'The ravens brought bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook.'"

"Jessie, Jessie, that is in the Bible, I know, for mother used to read it to me," said Chrissie in a frightened tone, "and Miss Boyd is ill and delirious."

"Aunt Juliet ill? Nonsense! why, she is ever so strong," exclaimed Gwen, waking up with a start, as dictatorial and unsubdued as ever.

"She is ill, I am sure, Jessie. Hold Wyn in your arms for a little time, whilst I see what we can do for Miss Boyd; and, Musef, will you please turn the

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light so that it falls on her face?" Chrissie said, bestirring herself now in good earnest.

Wyn awoke with the movement, and cried out sharply, and the sound seemed to distress Juliet, who moved her head to and fro, moaning sometimes, and sometimes talking of things that had happened long ago before Gwen was born.

"The missi-babas must not fear. The mem-sahib will have to grow worse before she can recover, like Busshu, who still wandereth and is astray in his mind," said Musef, trying to cheer them in their trouble.

"Where is Busshu? did he get hurt last night?" asked Jessie, as she rocked Wyn wildly in the endeavour to still his cries.

"Busshu is well cared for, and he grows better hourly; but I may not tell you where he is, because the priests of the Sacred Ox seek him in the hope to destroy," Musef replied, locking her lips firmly, as though no power in creation should make her divulge the secret of his hiding-place.

"Can you stay with us to-night, Musef?" Chrissie asked anxiously. She was applying rags dipped in water to Juliet's burning forehead, and chafing her clay-cold hands and feet to restore circulation.

"Musef may not linger now, for spies are about; but when the darkness falls, after another day, then will she come again with food for the poor white mem-sahib, and for the missi-babas too."

They were obliged to be content with this, though it would have taken half the terror of the night away if Musef could have stayed to share it with them.

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She left the cresset, however, and its tiny point of flaring, flickering light was a great comfort to the little household. Juliet talked a great deal, wild incoherencies for the most part, though sometimes she seemed conscious enough, and concerned about Wyn, who cried incessantly in a dreary wail of pain. Evidently he was ill too, and in view of these fresh anxieties Gwen regretted volubly that she had not died when she herself was ill, and thus escaped the present misery.

CHAPTER XV.

IN SEARCH OF THE HEIR.

MISS FERRARS had done as her nephew requested and telegraphed the tidings of the major's death to Mrs. Boyd, who was still at Evington Towers.

Troubles never come singly; and on poor Mrs. Boyd, at this particular time, they appeared to descend in battalions. First there had been the financial disaster overtaking her father, and which had been mainly due to rash speculation; following this came the worry about raising the money to repay Lal Musjid, and the bitter mortification of being compelled to beg it from Sir Wyndham. This trouble, however, had only existed in imagination, for no one could have been kinder than the baronet when she had put him in possession of the details of the case.

Perhaps his own recent trouble had softened him,

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or perhaps the fact that the major was now his heir made him more favourably disposed towards the embarrassed officer, for no sooner did he hear of the need than the money was forthcoming.

Then, indeed, Mrs. Boyd's heart beat high with hope. Her husband would leave the service at once, that was Sir Wyndham's wish; and instead of her having to make the journey out to India, Major Boyd could come home to her and bring the children with him.

The first cloud to darken their horizon was the news of the continued disturbances on the frontier, for Mrs. Boyd knew well that her husband would never consent to throw up his commission while his country had need of him. Then came ominous, disquieting rumours, not very trustworthy yet, nor tangible in form, but enough to seriously frighten Mrs. Boyd, whose maternal love had grown to a passion, from the hunger caused by separation.

She would have set out for Rampoostan at once, upon hearing these rumours, had such a thing been possible. But Sir Wyndham was ill, seriously ill, the doctors said, and she could not leave the poor old man to die alone. So she waited on from day to day, wearing out her heart in suspense as she watched by the sick-bed of her husband's kinsman and looked for the tidings that did not come.

At last there arrived the fatal tidings of the major's death, and a few hours afterwards Sir Wyndham also passed away.

But Mrs. Boyd's cup was not yet full, for two days later she learned that her children and Juliet were captives in Kajid territory.

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Then indeed the mother-love rose to a lion-like strength of endeavour; and waiting only until Sir Wyndham's funeral was over, she set out for India, resolved to search for the missing children herself, and to know no peace or rest until she found them.

It was in vain for her relatives to interpose and say she was not fit for the journey; go she must, and go she would.

There were other reasons besides those of mere maternal tenderness to urge her to action. Baby Wyn was Sir Wyndham now, and her own position as his mother was one of assured comfort. But should any ill fate overtake her youngest born, she and her daughters would be almost beggars, for the deceased baronet in his will left the whole of his magnificent property to his heir, and the heir, failing little Wyn, was a very distant cousin indeed.

Natures do not change in a day, however hard the discipline may be that is brought to bear upon them, and Mrs. Boyd having been proud and ambitious all her life, was proud and ambitious still, although perhaps in a lesser degree.

By her husband's death she had just missed the distinction of a title, and if aught of ill should overtake her baby now she would also miss the more material advantage of an ample income.

Of her journey back to Rampoostan nothing need be said, saving that she made it alone, a pathetic figure with hungry, restless eyes filled always with a consuming anxiety.

At Bombay the welcome tidings met her that Government had already bestirred itself in the matter, and was compelling the Rajah of Beshawur

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to restore the prisoners taken by his deputy, the Great Nom.

As a matter of fact the rajah had little or nothing to do with the business, his attention having been pretty fully occupied at the time in quelling a small rebellion which had been hatched among his twenty-four wives, in consequence of which affairs of state had to be relegated to the deputy, who was well content to have it so.

But when it came to offending the British Government and incurring the wrath of Kaiser-i-Hind, the rajah deemed it time for him to interfere and bid the wuzeer stay his hand.

In his own person the Great Nom would cheerfully have defied the Government, and cared not at all for the—to him—mythical White Queen over the seas. But when the rajah spoke he had to obey, or run the risk of losing his head.

The rebuilding of the railway bridge at Rampoostan was not sufficiently advanced to admit of trains crossing, and the passengers were ferried over the river in boats.

Mrs. Boyd looked about her in bewilderment. It was not the Rampoostan that she had known; the streets were some of them familiar, whilst others were altered almost beyond recognition through the spoliation of the place at the hands of the Kajids.

Dr. Perry met Mrs. Boyd upon her arrival, and for the one night she was to remain in the town lodged her in Major Felton's bungalow, where he himself was keeping house during its owner's absence.

However much Mrs. Boyd might have objected

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to this arrangement she was powerless to alter it, and forced to submit with outward serenity to accepting a shelter in the house of the man she had formerly ignored.

One long look she stole in the direction of her former home, but averted her gaze at the sight of Shan Dal Devi lounging upon the verandah smoking a cigar. He had refused to give up possession when Dr. Perry approached him on the subject, tauntingly advising the doctor to go to law about it.

This Mrs. Boyd preferred not to do. Lal Musjid had clearly gone beyond his rights, but to have made a stir in the matter would have been to publish abroad things which it was best to keep quiet. Besides, if the representative of the money-lender had the house, she had the money, which Dr. Perry handed back to her, and which was just now much more useful than couches, tables, or chairs.

The start for Alipahr, the next stage of Mrs. Boyd's journey, was made at dawn. She was to travel under the escort of Captain Blantyre and a small troop of native soldiers, who were going to the relief of the garrison in the border fort.

Captain Blantyre was a jolly young Irishman, who was almost reverential in his bearing towards the major's widow.

Chunderbah was still a heap of blackened ruins, although a telegraph office had been got into working order again, while one or two enterprising traders had opened shops and bazaars in packing-cases and tubs, or any other shelter that was obtainable. The stream of life and civilization was setting towards the place again, though, alas! it

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would be long before the traces of Kajid devastation were obliterated.

It was nearly sunset when they reached Alipahr, four days after leaving Rampoostan, and Mrs. Boyd drew back the curtains of her dhooli in order to catch the first glimpse of her husband's grave.

The battered old fort had undergone extensive repairs for the strengthening of its defences, the new being patched on to the old with picturesque though incongruous effect.

Travellers approaching Alipahr from the plains were visible a long way off, so that when the tired dusty troop toiled up the last reaches of the interminable road, they found the whole garrison turned out to meet them, band playing, flags flying, and every face decked in smiles of welcome.

"What is all the rejoicing for?" asked Mrs. Boyd in surprise.

"It is a welcome for you, madam," replied Captain Blantyre in a deferential tone.

"For me, and that tune!" she exclaimed bitterly, as the jubilant strains of "See, the conquering hero comes!" rang through the clear air, played with all the verve and go of which the men were capable.

"Shall I stop them?" asked the young officer, guessing something of what the poor lady must be feeling at this first sight of the place where her husband had met his fate.

"Yes, yes," she murmured faintly; and, sending a sepoy forward, Captain Blantyre bade him acquaint the officer in charge, of Mrs. Boyd's arrival, and her desire for a less demonstrative greeting.

She ordered the bearers to stop when the major's

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grave was reached, and, stepping out from her dhooli, entered the little fenced enclosure, and knelt beside the patch of earth covering her husband's remains. Silently and reverently the soldiers filed past, under the dark arch of the gateway into the patch of golden sunlight flooding the courtyard beyond. But the widow stayed outside in the shadow by the grave.

Captain Blantyre came back to her there after a time with a flushed eager face. "Madam," he ventured, "Lieutenant Benson has tidings of your children."

"The children—are they here?" she cried with an impetuosity that almost startled him.

"Not quite. But they are expected to-morrow. And may I beg that you will come in from the dew, which is falling fast."

She rose and accompanied him to the room where Lieutenant Benson waited to give her such details of her husband's death as he supposed she would be anxious to receive.

But to his surprise, when he attempted to speak of the major she shut him up with a quick gesture of impatience. "Not now, not now, if you please. Tell me of the prisoners, and how it is that you expect them so soon?"

"Madam, a runner reached here from Tara-Tarn at noon to-day, saying that the captive ladies and children, with the rajah's escort, had just reached that place from Ramoor, and would rest there a few hours before continuing their journey," said the officer, marvelling at the hardly-repressed passion of her utterance.

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"How far is Tara-Tarn from here?" she demanded, looking as if she was ready to start for the place at that very moment.

"Not so very far in actual mileage, but the road is execrable, in fact it is not a road at all, but merely a sheep-track across the hills. Wasji-Nullah is eight miles from here, and Tara-Tarn is about the same distance farther, I think," Lieutenant Benson replied respectfully, and taking a stump of pencil and an old envelope from his pocket, proceeded to draw a rough map of the route to be taken.

Mrs. Boyd watched him impatiently as if wondering how he could endure to fritter his time away in drawing maps that no one could understand; and when she spoke again her voice was imperious, and disdainful too. "I wonder, when you had these tidings, that you did not at once set forth to Tara-Tarn to take the ladies and children under your protection; it would surely have been better than to leave them unprotected through the night in a wild place such as I judge Tara-Tarn to be."

"It is a wild place, madam, being neither more nor less than a big sheepfold, where the rajah keeps his sheep in the winter. But it would not have been consistent with my duty to leave Alipahr even to go that short distance."

"Why not?" she asked in surprise.

"He who guards Alipahr has need to keep his eyes open, and it is not wise to be venturesome in such a case," he replied.

Mrs. Boyd clasped her hands with a despairing gesture, "Oh, God in heaven, how hard it is to wait!" she moaned.

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Seeing her distress of mind, the officer bowed silently and withdrew. When he had gone, the harassed mother dropped on her knees, praying for patience to wait. Ah me! for her, it was all waiting now.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE RETURN OF THE CAPTIVES.

MRS. BOYD slept but fitfully through the night, being tortured by visions of what the prisoners might be enduring camped in the lonely sheepfold at Tara-Tarn.

With the first glimmer of dawn she was astir, and, making a hurried, perfunctory kind of a toilet, went out to find Lieutenant Benson.

But he was nowhere to be seen, and she applied to the first person she met concerning his whereabouts.

He had gone, said one of the garrison, to a look-out camp on a sharp spur of the hills behind Alipahr. This camp stood on the extreme edge of the frontier, dividing the British dominions from Beshawur, and commanded the road from Wasji-Nullah, by which the captives would return.

"Could I not go there also?" she asked, feeling that anything was more tolerable than to sit with folded hands through the long hours that dragged so slowly past.

But Captain Blantyre, to whom the question had been put, shook his head in a discouraging fashion.

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"It is a rough place, madam, and with no accommodation for ladies. If the party from Tara-Tarn do not arrive before sunset, it is probable that Lieutenant Benson may remain at the camp all night."

Mrs. Boyd's face grew white at the bare suggestion of delay. "Do you think, are you afraid that they will not come?" she gasped, while the sound of many waters surged in her ears, and a thick darkness obscured for a moment the bright sunshine all around her.

"The road is very bad, and it is possible that the rajah's escort may bring them no farther than the frontier line, although the agreement was worded 'to the nearest border fort'. But if they are not here by sunset, Lieutenant Benson will set off to Tara-Tarn at dawn to-morrow to discover what has delayed them."

"And yet when I spoke to Lieutenant Benson last night about going to this place, he declared it was not consistent with his duty to do so; pray how am I to reconcile the two statements?" she asked.

"Your question had reference to the condition of things prior to my arrival, madam, when Lieutenant Benson was in sole charge of the fort. Now that I am here to share the responsibility, things are of course altered," said Captain Blantyre with commendable patience.

Mrs. Boyd sighed heavily, and turned away. No one but herself could know how hard was this discipline of waiting, and the minutes magnified themselves to hours as she surveyed them in mental perspective.

Jemadar Fateh Nikoo, the sage and veteran of

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Alipahr, did his best to soothe and cheer her by offering to take her to the top of the tower whence the first glimpse of arrivals from the hills might be obtained. And when the fiercest heat of the noon-tide had passed, she signified her desire to accept his suggestion.

"Mem-sahib must have a care to the holes in the steps," Nikoo said, as he piloted the lady up the broken stairs of the tower, where the feet of women had so seldom trod.

Mrs. Boyd shivered and faltered more than once, but her desperate desire to catch the first glimpse of the returning captives was stronger than any mere personal fear, and she persevered until at length the little platform at the top was reached.

The long ascent, and the sensation of giddiness from the height she had reached, turned her sick and faint at the first, and she was glad to sink down for a brief rest on the floor before looking out from the loopholes in the wall, which reached as high as her head from the ground.

"Mem-sahib will be quite better presently; let her but shut her eyes and wait awhile," murmured Nikoo sympathetically, as he bent a dark anxious face over her.

But Mrs. Boyd waved him off and struggled to her feet. Truth to tell, she had a great inward distrust of natives, massing the good and the bad types together, and not even realizing that there might be any difference between them. And the uppermost thought in her mind was that Nikoo desired her to close her eyes in order that he might seize and hurl her from the dizzy height of the

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tower, or for some other equally criminal and nefarious purpose.

Yet he looked innocent and harmless enough, as, perceiving that the mem-sahib required nothing of him at the present, he squatted in great content in the little nook at the top of the steps and chewed pan.

Mrs. Boyd moved slowly from loophole to loophole, her gaze wandering out over the wide view all around, her brain entirely refusing to grasp the sense of what she saw. The sun beat fiercely upon her, despite the sheltering white umbrella with which she had provided herself; but the rays were tempered a little by the cool breeze blowing from the hills.

An hour stole by, and another with leaden feet crept slowly after. Then a single trumpet-blast from somewhere in the distance echoed sharply through the sunlit silence, and Nikoo rose from the floor.

"Him Kajid-man a-coming," he said, advancing to the loophole next to where Mrs. Boyd was standing, and letting his keen eyes roam out over the low hills towards the north.

"How do you know?" asked Mrs. Boyd, straining her eyes in the direction in which Nikoo was looking, yet seeing nothing.

"Mem-sahib may behold a little dust like an autumn fog away to the north-east from between the split rocks, and ah, there it is, the first dhooli has come into sight!" and Nikoo drew a hideous grimace to express the extreme satisfaction he felt.

"I can see nothing but fog or dust, or whatever

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it is; and, oh dear, how far away they are, and how slowly they come!"

"Will it pleasure mem-sahib to go forth to meet them?" asked Nikoo, anxious to please and quick to suggest.

"Yes, yes," she replied, moving hurriedly towards the stairs; but with a quick movement the native forestalled her and led the way, so that should her feet trip over the uneven steps, he might interpose his body between her and a fall, which might mean destruction.

Mrs. Boyd, noticing his action, had the grace to feel ashamed of her former suspicion, as she followed him down the dark windings of the stairs, which were lighted only by rifle-ports or the yawning holes in the steps, where a gleam of daylight came up from below.

"They are coming?" asked Captain Blantyre, meeting them when they reached the lower level.

"Him Kajid-man carrying dhooli on him's shoulders," replied Nikoo, drooping one of his own shoulders to portray the wearied bend of the bearers.

"Then let's have the band out and give them a rousing welcome, the same as we had yesterday," exclaimed Captain Blantyre with quite boyish enthusiasm.

"Oh no, no!" cried poor Mrs. Boyd, whose strained nerves revolted at the bare idea. But no one heard, or if he did, failed to pay any heed to her protest, and there was a great scuttling to and fro of the various performers to get themselves in readiness for the march out.

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A hitch occurred just before the start that threatened to upset the whole arrangement, when it was discovered that the drummer had gone to the look-out camp and there was no one to take his place. But half a dozen volunteers came forward, each of whom felt certain of his own ability to manipulate the drum-sticks. A hasty choice was made, and the company formed up.

Captain Blantyre ordered out a dhooli for Mrs. Boyd, but she refused to be carried, preferring in her feverish excitement the exertion of walking to the swaying, swinging motion of the dhooli.

The road was very rough, and toilsome, and dusty, but the band seemed not to care at all, and piped and tootled and trumpeted with amazing zest and vigour, whilst the drummer beat in time and out, with a refreshing desire that everyone should feel he was doing his level best to give them good measure in the matter of sound.

They played "God Save the Queen!" "The Girl I left behind me", "Home, Sweet Home", and "See the Conquering Hero Comes!", and this comprising the whole of their repertoire, when they came to the end they just began at the beginning and played them all over again.

Away in the distance, appearing and disappearing with the windings of the road, she could see the long train of dhoolies, mules, and men on foot, and riding beside them was Lieutenant Benson.

Mrs. Boyd watched the approach with a sinking sensation of fear at her heart. There, almost within shouting distance, were her children, for whom she had come to search over thousands of

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miles of sea and land. Yet she scarcely felt glad that they were so near. In fact she seemed incapable of feeling at all, so numb and chill were all her faculties from the effects of the long strain.

Then she lagged behind, and presently, when her trembling feet refused any longer to do their office, sank on a big stone that lay by the roadside.

But she was not quite alone or unnoticed though, for Nikoo, who had been told off by Captain Blantyre to attend on the lady, stood at attention a few feet away, looking as grim and motionless as a bronze statue.

Mrs. Boyd paid no heed to him. It is doubtful whether she even knew that he was there. An eagle sailed over her head towards its distant eyrie in the hills, and a family of lizards strolled past her feet, bound for a big heap of loosely-piled stones where they had their home, but she did not start or move, although, in the past, the mere sight of a lizard had been enough to make her quiver and scream with disgust.

Half an hour passed. The band had met the party of returning captives, and was marching back in front of them. They had just rounded a bend in the track and appeared within range of Mrs. Boyd's vision once more, when she saw running in front of them two girls in ragged, dirty clothing.

She would have thought they were beggars but that their light skins proclaimed them Europeans, and she was just wondering who they could be, when they began shouting, "Mother, mother, mother!" and she rose to her feet with a wild

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THE RETURN OF THE CAPTIVES.

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gesture of horror, recognizing the voices for Gwen's and Jessie's.

The power to speak seemed to have vanished utterly; she could only stand there in the centre of the dusty road and hold her arms open wide to receive them.

"Mother, mother!" sobbed Gwen, who was the first to reach the haven of those sheltering arms; "oh, mother, mother, you can have no idea how dreadful it has been!"

Mrs. Boyd bent her head and kissed her daughter, yet not without an inward revulsion, for Gwen was exceedingly dirty, and her long black hair hung matted and dusty down her back.

Jessie had reached her by this time with that same cry of "Mother, mother!" weeping and sobbing with such vehemence that the mother's silence passed unnoticed.

Standing there, with her girls clasped to her heart, while they hugged her with stormy caresses, Mrs. Boyd was trying to frame the question she so much longed yet dreaded to ask. But, struggle as she might, the words would not come, and her tongue grew parched, clinging to the roof of her mouth.

Then she noticed that the band had ceased to play, the men walking in sober silence, whilst the flag was lowered until it almost trailed in the dust.

Rousing herself from this mental paralysis, which seemed to have laid its touch on her faculties, she pushed away the encircling arms of her young daughters, asking in a harsh, choked voice, "What is it? What is the matter, Gwen? Why is the band not playing?"

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"It is because of Aunt Juliet, mother — Aunt Juliet and poor little Wyn," Gwen said, beginning to cry, and hiding her face on her mother's shoulder.

Mrs. Boyd stood rigid and still, as if she had been turned to stone. It was not bereavement alone that had fallen upon her now, but the rending away of all her ambitious hopes, for if Wyn was gone, there was nothing left!

CHAPTER XVII.

GWEN'S STORY.

THERE was a sound of many waters in Mrs. Boyd's ears, yet she did not faint as she stood there in the dusty road, waiting for the others to come up. Gwen and Jessie were crying, but no tears dimmed her eyes. In that supreme moment of anguish she had none to shed.

The returned captives greeted her, and she responded to them in the dull manner of one who is partially stunned; and the train passed, a big dhooli with drawn curtains bringing up the rear.

"Look, mother!" cried Gwen, pointing to it as it passed, "two of the rajah's wives are in there, and a native baby. He has sent them to you instead of Aunt Juliet, Chrissie, and poor little Wyn."

A spasm of anguish shook Mrs. Boyd. "Tell me about it!" she cried.

"Not now, mother. Wait until you are stronger," Gwen said soothingly, winding her arms round her mother.

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"Mother, mother, is father dead?" burst out Jessie, noticing for the first time her mother's mourning apparel.

"Hush! hush!" breathed her sister warningly.

But Mrs. Boyd had expected the question, and was ready to answer it. "Yes, your father lies here at Alipahr in a soldier's grave. And now that Wyn is dead too, we three are all that remain of the family."

"Lieutenant Benson says that perhaps Wyn is not dead," corrected Gwen hastily.

"What?" cried Mrs. Boyd, catching at Jessie's arm to steady herself.

"They were taken ill with small-pox, that is, Aunt Juliet and Wyn were, and when the rajah's man carried them away to the court-of-the-doomed Chrissie Felton would go with them," sobbed Gwen, seeing that it was of no use trying to keep the explanations back any longer.

"What is it, this court-of-the-doomed?" asked Mrs. Boyd. She was following after the train of dhoolies on the road back to Alipahr now, with the girls walking one on either side of her.

"It is a place behind the big temple, where they put all people with infectious diseases," Gwen explained in a hesitating tone. "The men carried Aunt Juliet there, and Chrissie took Wyn herself, declaring that no one else should touch him."

"What is it?—a hospital?" persisted Mrs. Boyd, gathering that there was more behind.

Gwen's eyes grew anxious as she looked at her mother, doubtful as to how much she dared to tell; but Jessie had fewer scruples, and burst into an

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almost incoherent rush of words, "No, no, it is a kind of prison where they carry people and leave them to die. There is no one to feed them or to give them drink; and none who go in there ever come out again. Chrissie knew it, but she would go, because she would not let Aunt Juliet and Wyn be left alone with no one to care for them."

"But why did you allow them to be taken there at all, carried away to die of neglect?" gasped Mrs. Boyd, clenching her hands tightly to keep from swooning.

"We could not help it. In Ramoor it is the law, and it is done to keep infection from spreading," said Gwen, choking back a sob.

"Something must be done!" cried the mother. "Perhaps they may be rescued yet."

Something must be done, but what? It was the question that palpitated on every lip as the story of Chrissie Felton's brave self-sacrifice went round among the garrison. Before a satisfactory answer had been come at, or any systematic plan of action determined on, there was the stir of a second arrival at the border fort, and Major Felton, with a small troop, cantered in under the arched gateway and dismounted in the court-yard.

"Major Felton!" exclaimed Lieutenant Benson in surprise, hurrying to greet his superior.

The major turned to him with a glad smile on his face. "So they have come back from Ramoor. Where is my little girl?"

The young man started with a look of horror on his face, for Chrissie was still in Ramoor, and he must break the news to her father.

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It was one of those crises that make cowards of brave men, and Lieutenant Benson was but as his fellows. Stepping back to the door from whence he had just emerged, he called in a tone of entreaty, "Mrs. Boyd, will you come and explain to Major Felton—"

"Mrs. Boyd here—in Alipahr?" exclaimed the major in great surprise.

"Yes," said that lady, coming quickly in response to the summons of Lieutenant Benson; "I came for my children, Major Felton, and—and—"

"They have not come?" he asked quickly.

"Only Gwen and Jessie. Your Chrissie stayed behind in the noblest spirit of self-sacrifice to care for Juliet and little Wyn," replied Mrs. Boyd in an unsteady tone.

"Were they ill that they could not come?" demanded the major in a strange, hard tone.

"Juliet and Wyn were sick with small-pox, and taken away to a horrible place to die, and—oh, Major Felton, how can I tell you? Your noble little daughter refused to leave them."

"Small-pox, did you say?" he asked with a start.

She bowed her head. To speak was impossible.

"It is all right. She had the disease when a child. I'll start off to Ramoor in the morning and bring her back," he said with a great relief in his tone.

"Major Felton, if you start for Ramoor in the morning, will you take me with you?" pleaded Mrs. Boyd in an imploring manner.

He hesitated a moment, then asked brusquely, "Can you ride?"

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"Yes, yes!" she cried, and would have answered so if he had said, "Can you walk?"

"Then we will start for Ramoor in the morning, you and I; and it may be that God will smile upon our endeavour and give us back our children alive."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A JOURNEY OF HOPE AND FEAR.

WHEN Major Felton had said in Rampoostan that he was going to seek for his child, and to bring her home or avenge her, he found himself confronted by a difficulty, which proved insuperable to his purpose.

His duty did not permit of his leaving. For a short time the mad idea of throwing up his commission and starting off there and then presented itself to him. But common sense stepped in to prevent his making this unavailing blunder; for even if he had carried out his intention and started on his search, what could one man do against a multitude?

So he curbed his impatience as best he might, while the ponderous machinery of government was set in motion; and a threat, big enough to frighten even the Rajah of Beshawur, was fulminated and sent forth from the proper quarters.

Before this was done came the tidings of further depredations by the Kajid mercenaries upon the outlying towns and villages on the frontier; and,

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taking a company with him, Major Felton bore down on these miscreants, hunting them from place to place, and succeeding eventually in capturing the leader and driving the rest back over the frontier into their own country, where they preyed upon each other, and fought among themselves like the famous Kilkenny cats.

But Major Felton had deposited his prisoner in the strongest dungeon of the strongest fort in the neighbourhood, and leaving the larger part of his men to guard the place, had pressed on to Alipahr with the remainder, hoping to be in time to meet Chrissie on her release from bondage.

There was now only one course open to him, and that was to press forward to Ramoor with all speed, taking the risk of being cut to pieces by disbanded Kajids on the way.

Travelling on horseback, he might hope to reach the City of God by sunset on the fourth day, although dhoolies would require ten or twelve. Mrs. Boyd's plea to be taken also might prove a hindrance to rapid travel, but, on the other hand, she might give valuable assistance when Ramoor was reached, for she could penetrate where the foot of man might not hope to tread.

But the journey must be performed on horseback, and the major had yet to learn how the prospect would affect her, or whether, indeed, she was a sufficiently good horsewoman to make the attempt feasible.

Gwen and Jessie were clinging around her, making loud and tearful lamentations over the prospect of being separated from their mother again, whilst

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Mrs. Boyd herself seemed worried and unhinged by their pertinacity.

The major forebore for a time to intrude himself on this scene, but finding presently that the lamentations of the girls were growing louder, he quietly edged himself into the group.

"You said you could ride. Can you ride all the way to Ramoor?" he asked. "It will take twice, perhaps three times, as long with dhoolies, and time is of the utmost value to us now."

"Oh yes! I used to be considered a good horsewoman, although I have not been in the saddle for years," Mrs. Boyd answered quickly, putting the girls aside and standing up with an eager look on her face, and with a ready comprehension of the needs of the case that was reassuring to the major, who, however, deemed it his duty to try her a little further yet.

"There will be difficulty, and there may be danger, with odd bits of fighting to vary the monotony of the way. We shall be uninvited visitors, you see, and his Serene Excellency the Rajah, or that other important personage, the Great Nom, may deem our intrusion ill-judged, and resent it accordingly."

"I am not afraid. And I can shoot if necessary," she answered composedly enough, though a little shiver crept over her at the thought of what the expedition might have in store.

"Very good. And now may I beg that you will go to bed as soon as possible in order to secure a good night's rest. I will see to all the arrangements for the journey, and be ready to start at sunrise," the major said; and, obedient to orders, Mrs. Boyd

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was turning away, when Lieutenant Benson interposed:

"What is to be done with the two dusky beauties from Ramoor, and the juvenile, who were sent in exchange for the sick captives? Are they to be retained as hostages, or sent back with the bearers when they return?"

Major Felton thought for a moment.

"We certainly do not want to keep them," he said slowly. "On the other hand, if they are sent back at once it may be visited on their heads, poor things, that they failed to give satisfaction. I think, Benson, the kindest thing will be to keep them here for a little time, until we return from Ramoor, and they can then be sent back to the rajah with a polite message."

This arrangement commending itself to the dusky ladies, who were afterwards interviewed upon the subject, the inmates of the fort proceeded to snatch a night's rest as comfortably as possible under the circumstances. The train of bearers from Beshawur had been accommodated outside the walls, it being deemed not expedient to admit them in.

The best apartments were given up to the ladies and children, as a matter of course, whilst everyone else did the best he could for himself, with the floor for a bed, and anything he could lay hold of for a pillow.

It seemed to Mrs. Boyd, in her feverish desire for action, that morning would never dawn. Yet before it came she fell into a sweet, refreshing slumber, dreaming that her troubles were all over, and little Wyn safe cradled in her arms once more.

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Gwen awakened her.

"Mother, Major Felton has been knocking at the door to know if you are nearly ready," she said, adding impetuously, "Oh, mother, mother, I can't bear to have you go to that dreadful place!"

"Wyn is there, and your Aunt Juliet. It cannot surely be worse for me than for them," Mrs. Boyd answered sadly. Selfish as she was herself, it was marvellous how the same failing in her daughters grated on her sensibilities.

But there was no time to combat it now—that must be left to the future—and, making a hurried toilet, Mrs. Boyd took her breakfast standing, as the Children of Israel ate the Passover, and then declared herself ready to start.

Major Felton had secured Jemadar Fateh Nikoo for a guide, placing no dependence in the swarm of dhooli-bearers outside the gates, who would be as likely to lead them wrong as right, and to glory in the achievement.

Besides Nikoo there were a dozen men well-mounted and fully armed, six baggage mules with provisions for the journey, a horse with a side-saddle for Mrs. Boyd, and Major Felton on a savage, big, black horse that looked fierce enough to go to battle on its own account, without the trifling detail of a rider thrown in.

The morning was cool and the horses were fresh, and the rescue party rode out of Alipahr, and along the road to Wasji-Nullah, at a fine, brisk rate, Mrs. Boyd at first in a flutter of agitation over the unwonted exercise, but settling to the work in good earnest as they swept onward, round the curves of

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the lower hills, heading steadily for the north-east.

The little garrison at the look-out camp greeted them with a ringing cheer as they rode past without drawing rein, and, following the windings of the track, made a good pace down the falling ground to the broad valley, through which runs the frontier line dividing the rajah's dominions from those of Kaiser-i-Hind.

Following the long reaches of this valley for a few miles farther, they left it at last to make a sharp turn due north, and commenced the rough ascent of Wasji-Nullah, where the too-adventurous garrison of Alipahr had so nearly been cut to pieces a few months previously.

It was a narrow defile, hemmed in with towering black rocks, among which grew a species of stunted pine, where it could find sufficient depth of soil in which to root. Here and there down the sides of the rocks trickled tiny streams, which would turn to foaming cascades a few weeks later on, when the melting of the mountain snows should swell the water-courses among the hills.

The going was slower now, the horses having to pick their way at a sober walking pace among the rough stones and loose flints of the track. Major Felton slowed his black charger down to ride by Mrs. Boyd's side and to keep a sharp eye upon the steps of her steed.

"Did the dhoolies come this way?" she asked, as the climb became stiffer, and was more like scrambling up the steep roof of a house than anything else that she could think of.

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"Yes, there is no other way. We shall follow the dhooli track the whole time, Nikoo says, no short cuts being of advantage on the line of route."

No more was said then; it was not the time or place for conversation, when the attention of all had to be concentrated on their steeds.

At Tara-Tarn they halted for a rest; and Mrs. Boyd shivered anew at the thought of her children spending the night in such a place, though indeed they might easily have been in a worse case; for the natural caves had been divided into sections, and fenced from the incursions of wolves and jackals to harry the sheep, and these gave a shelter from the cold of the nights and the snow that still fell at intervals in these higher altitudes.

After leaving Tara-Tarn, and the few shepherds tending their flocks there, the party plunged into a wilderness, which, excepting themselves, seemed empty of every living thing.

In the centre of this solitude they camped for the night. The men and their leader, wrapped in their big coats, lay on the ground; Mrs. Boyd was in a tiny tent, that threatened to blow away bodily fifty times and more during the night. The weather was bitterly cold, and there were frequent showers of snow.

But the morning dawned bright as the previous one had been, and with the inspiriting influence of the sun to charm away their depression, the little band set forward again on their journey.

The second day was like the first; sometimes they scrambled uphill, and sometimes they scrambled down. Now the track would lead along the

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face of a precipice, with a wall of rock towering a hundred feet above their heads on one side, while on the other it sheered away a hundred-and-fifty feet down, to where a black river thundered over its rocky bed. Again they would wind in and out among crowding peaks, that jostled each other so closely as to render it necessary for the party to proceed in single file until the track broadened.

Towards evening on the second day they had crossed the rocky boundary of Beshawur, and dropped down once more to cultivated lands. By a natural sequence the second night held more rest and comfort for the whole party than the first, and, wearied out by so many hours in the sharp air of the mountains, Mrs. Boyd dropped into a profound, refreshing slumber, and dreamed that her troubles were over, and that she was holding Wyn in her arms once more.

"That is twice the dream has come to me. If it comes again I shall know there is room for hope," she said to Major Felton, as they rode side by side towards the end of the third day's journey.

"There is always room for hope while God rules in heaven," he replied gravely, having no great faith in visions or dreams, regarding them merely as phantoms of a disordered imagination.

"Of course; but it means so much to me, this finding of my baby. Apart from the fact that he is my child, and I love him, he is necessary to us in a temporal sense, since if he is dead we shall be little better than beggars, whilst if he survives we are rich," she rejoined with a hard sob of pain, for the ruling passion was strong yet, and the thought

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of what hung in the balance filled her with a stormy revolt against the unkindness of fate.

Her companion ventured a word of consolation, but she only retorted bitterly, "Providence would surely never be so cruel as to deprive me of all that money, and give it to those Carfax-Boyds, who already have more than they know what to do with."

Major Felton shook his head and was silent, not venturing on a reply while Mrs. Boyd was in this mood. She was at all times very much of an enigma to him, with his simple trust in God above, and his abundant faith in his fellow-creatures.

"Those letters I sent from England to my husband at Rampoostan, who opened them?" asked Mrs. Boyd after a silence.

It was the question that Major Felton had been dreading ever since he left Alipahr in Mrs. Boyd's company: and he flushed scarlet under his sun-tan, hesitating for an answer that should satisfy his questioner, and yet keep her in ignorance of his share in the matter.

But her eyes were upon him, and the words he desired would not shape themselves to sentences in his brain, so that he was obliged to fall back on brutal candour after all. "I opened them at Dr. Perry's request. He was anxious to discover if the money for the loan was there, that he might recover the house and furniture from the hands of Lal Musjid's representative. But unfortunately, though we took the draft to Shan Dal Devi, he merely snapped his fingers in our faces, and announced his intention of still sticking to the stuff."

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"And you read the letters, Major Felton?" she persisted, still looking the unfortunate officer steadily in the face, with the result that he grew redder than before.

"I had to glance them through, madam; it seemed necessary under the circumstances, which you will admit were of a perplexing character," he said apologetically.

Mrs. Boyd was silent for a long time, and Major Felton was beating his brains for a plausible pretext to leave her side and ride either to the front or the rear, when she spoke again. "I think you are a very noble, Christian gentleman, Major Felton, to have read those letters, and yet to treat me as you have done, and from my heart I thank you."

Major Felton was simply overwhelmed with confusion at this, and mumbling something quite unintelligible, rode hastily forward to where Nikoo, in the capacity of guide, was heading the procession. He did not return to the side of Mrs. Boyd until it was time to camp for the night.

The next morning at the starting time Nikoo informed them that in three hours they would be within sight of Ramoor, if only the track proved as good as on the previous day.

This was cheering tidings to Mrs. Boyd, who was very weary with so many hours in the saddle. But with every mile that passed now her excitement grew, and the alternation of hope and fear became almost intolerable.

She was very silent, indeed almost taciturn. And Major Felton avoided her when he could, feeling very much of a culprit still, concerning his know-

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ledge—gained from the letters he had opened—of Mrs. Boyd's previous opinion of himself. It scarcely tended to lessen his embarrassment, that she had so completely changed towards him now; and being in some respects a quite overwhelmingly shy man, he kept at a distance and left her to herself.

"Mem-sahib may behold and see, yonder is the City of God," said Nikoo, riding close to the side of Mrs. Boyd, and pointing to something away in the far distance.

She followed the direction of his finger with her eyes, staring long and painfully at the precise part of the horizon indicated by him, but finally shook her head and gave it up. "It is of no use, Nikoo, we were not all born with magnifying-glasses in our heads, you know. I am quite content to believe that Ramoor is there, but I cannot see it."

"Mem-sahib will soon discover it rising from the earth to meet her. There is the big temple with a red roof, the temple of the Sacred Ox, that is brown to the eye when beheld from the distance, and the two lesser temples, whilst in the middle of the city rises the palace of the rajah, that is carved in strange devices to attract the gaze of all who approach Ramoor."

Mrs. Boyd stared at him in surprise; it seemed impossible that he could distinguish so much at a distance so great. But his manner was so sincere, that it carried conviction with it, and she gave a little sigh of dissatisfaction because her sight was inferior to his.

The road on which they were travelling now,

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although only a rough track, was bordered on either side by well-cultivated fields, and as it moreover connected thickly-populated villages, might be considered the highway to the capital. Evidently the people of Beshawur wasted little time or skill in road-making, and indeed there was scant need for it, seeing that wheeled carts and carriages were unknown, and even the corn was carried on the backs of mules and donkeys, or laden on the broad shoulders of the patient oxen, which ploughed the fields and harrowed in the seed.

When the party of strangers entered and passed through the villages, the inhabitants, both men and women, fled away in terror, running to cover like wild rabbits, and craning curious heads to gaze after the barbarians from the south when they had passed.

"Does mem-sahib behold it now—the City of God, which stands at the end of the journey?" asked Nikoo, two hours later, coming again to the side of Mrs. Boyd.

"Yes, I can see it now—what there is of it to see; but how small it is, Nikoo, it looks only a big village!" she said in surprise.

"Him Ramoor bigger than he looks; he full, choke-full of little houses, crammed in tight, like mem-sahib's bag," replied Nikoo, pointing to the small, but plethoric travelling-bag which Mrs. Boyd carried before her on the saddle.

Their approach had already been seen from the city, and the space outside the gate which they were approaching was crowded with people thronging out to stare at the strangers.

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Major Felton was riding now by the side of Mrs. Boyd, and she perceived, with secret uneasiness, how grave and anxious he looked.

"Do you anticipate trouble in our reception?" she asked.

"I have anticipated trouble all the way, but it has not come; so perhaps my forebodings may meet a like disappointment here," he replied with a reassuring smile, which, however, failed to convey much comfort to Mrs. Boyd.

"What will you do when you reach the place?" she demanded, eyeing the increasing crowd with considerable anxiety.

"Supposing they let us enter, which from present appearances seems doubtful, I admit, I shall ride straight to the palace and demand an interview with the rajah; then, if he is not at home to visitors, we must be content with that jack-in-office, the wuzeer. Ah! here he comes riding out from the gate. Now, Mrs. Boyd, is he not really a vision of magnificence?"

Major Felton's mirth was infectious, and besides, the appearance of the Great Nom was well calculated to provoke a smile from the most melancholy of beholders. His flowing yellow petticoats were spread in voluminous folds about him, so that the poor mule that bore him was, to a certain extent, buried beneath so much drapery. The blue fringe that bordered the petticoats swept the ground in places—of course not to the improvement of these adornments. Around his neck he wore chains of gold, to which had been tied bunches of marigolds and vivid blue irises; the blue-and-yellow

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idea was still further carried out in his get-up by his wrists and arms, as far as his skinny little elbows, being painted in broad alternating bands of a deep chrome-yellow and indigo-blue. This toilet, surmounted by the high jewelled cap, was sufficiently remarkable and striking. Could the Great Nom have been transported, just as he then appeared, to the Bois de Boulogne or our own English Rotten Row, he might there have received the notice and attention the eccentricities of his costume deserved, but plainly his splendour was wasted on the lethargic denizens of Beshawur, who scarcely gave him a second look as he passed.

He had evidently been warned of the approach of Major Felton's party, and had come out for the purpose of meeting them, riding forward at a sedate pace, as befitted his dignity, and causing his attendants to regulate the progress of their rather frisky steeds to the same sober walk.

When he arrived within shouting distance, he called a halt, at the same time signing to the advancing strangers to stop also; which they immediately did, drawing into a compact body, and waiting for the Great Nom to speak first.

"Come you in peace, or to plunder and destroy in the City of God?" he shrieked, his thin voice sounding strident and harsh in the ears of the listeners.

"We come to require at the hands of the Rajah of Beshawur three captives—two maidens and an infant—unlawfully detained by him in this city of Ramoor, and for whom Kaiser-i-Hind makes search," Nikoo shouted back, his deep, melodious

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voice in strong contrast to the shrill cackle of the wuzeer.

"Sheetula did not love them, and they fell victims to the scourge of the skin. Ask no more for them, but go delight thine eyes with Sodya and Morana, whom his Serene Excellency the Rajah of Beshawur hath bestowed as a free gift on the owners of the two maidens and the infant, who have perished by the plague."

Mrs. Boyd gave a faint scream when Nikoo had translated this reply for her benefit. But Major Felton bade her not despair too soon, for the small-pox victims might not be dead yet, even though the pompous little wuzeer spoke of them as beyond the reach of hope.

"Sodya and Morana are very well in their way, and the infant is a lusty child," went on Nikoo, speaking from the major's dictation; "and it is good and kind of his Serene Excellency the Rajah of Beshawur to bestow them as a gift. But the two maidens and the infant, whom Sheetula would not succour, so well-beloved are they of Kaiser-i-Hind, that she hath sent for them alive or dead; therefore, if life hath indeed departed, hand over their dead bodies that we may carry them to Alipahr and entomb them according to the usages of their ancestors."

"They are dead, dead, dead!" shrieked the wuzeer, his voice a rapid crescendo of wrath. "They are dead, dead, dead! and the crows have picked their bones!"

There was a low groan from Mrs. Boyd when Nikoo translated this, and then she slipped unconscious from her horse.

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One of the escort caught her as she fell, and with the aid of his comrades, laid her gently upon the ground.

But they made no effort to restore her from her swoon, feeling that, for a little time, perhaps, unconsciousness was for her the kindest condition.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE COURT-OF-THE-DOOMED.

THE spot to which the sufferers from the dread scourge of small-pox were carried, was a court-yard at the rear of the big temple, which, for size and magnificence, might be reckoned the cathedral of Ramoor. The rajah paid his devotions here when he paid them anywhere; but the wuzeer was an ardent worshipper at the shrine of the Sacred Ox, and many were the rivalries and jealousies consequent upon this difference of opinion.

The court-yard was accessible only by a door tucked away behind a big image of Sooryu, who was considered the chief deity of the big temple, though several others were worshipped there also. This door gave entrance to a vaulted passage, and so through another door to a paved yard, surrounded by a sort of verandah. A small tank in the centre of the yard was half-full of muddy, unpleasant-looking water; and here and there about the yard and verandah lay whitened fragments of human bones, picked clean long since by

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the big black crows, of which numbers might be seen hovering about on the roof of the verandah, or perched on the pinnacles of the temple.

Chrissie saw them, as, with the fevered form of baby Wyn in her arms, she followed the priests, who were carrying Juliet to the court-of-the-doomed. And when the men laid their burden down on the hard stone floor of the verandah, one of the creatures, ghoul-like in its horrid tameness, fluttered down with a harsh croak from above, and alighted on the ground close to the sufferer.

"And the ravens brought bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening. Don't be afraid, children, they will feed us too," said Juliet, as she moved her head restlessly in the throes of delirium.

Chrissie drove away the crow with a fierce gesture and turned to the priests.

"You cannot leave the mem-sahib lying there; she will die from the chill of the cold stones beneath her," she said in the sharp, dictatorial tone which the conquering race so often use in addressing the coloured population.

"What matters it? A few hours more or less, she is doomed, and to such, death is kindest when he comes quickly. Lay the infant beside her, daughter, and come purge thyself from infection in the smoke of the temple fires, and may Sheetula preserve us all!" retorted the priest piously.

"I am not going away, I am going to stay here," said Chrissie in a determined tone, sitting down on the step of the verandah beside Juliet, and rocking Wyn gently in her arms.

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"But you cannot, daughter, they are brought here to die, and if you remain you will perish also," he urged, struck by the courage and pluck of the white maiden from over the far seas.

"Then if I must I will die too," she said, though not without a nervous qualm, for she had caught sight of the whitening bones, and was filled with the gloomiest forebodings.

The priest who had spoken to her first shook his head at this, and kept silence; but the other, his fellow, who had assisted in bringing Juliet to the court-of-the-doomed, said something in an undertone, of which Chrissie made out only a few words, of which days and provisions were the most noticeable.

"What is that you say—you have to bring me provisions for two, three, how many days?" she asked, her voice sharp with anxiety, for the reply would measure out the span of her remaining hours, she thought, and the limit of the food supply mark the limit of her life.

"You can have atā and water enough to last for three days for you and these," replied the first priest with a motion of his hand towards Juliet and Wyn. "But by that time you will need nothing, and then the crows will have their turn."

His words made Chrissie shiver anew, and so full of nervous terrors was she that it was with difficulty she could keep herself from rushing back through the vaulted passage which stood as the way of life to her now.

She might have done it in the panic that came down upon her then, even though by flight she left

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the others to perish miserably and alone. But at that moment Wyn's small hand stole round her neck, and he cried plaintively, "Is—is—is". It was the only coherent sound of which he was capable, and was meant for her name, an accomplishment that she had beguiled weary hours in teaching him.

A rain of tears fell from her eyes, and, hugging him closely to her breast, she murmured fondly, "Yes, my darling, Is—is—is is here, and she will never leave her precious one!"

The tears did her good, and seemed to wash away the apprehensions that had caused her heart to flutter so wildly.

"You will not come, daughter?" asked the priest when, having brought the provisions and a great jar of water, he halted for a moment at the entrance to the vaulted passages as if loth to leave her to her fate.

"I cannot leave them," she said simply, then turned her back towards him, for much she feared the craven tendencies of her own heart, and dreaded lest after all she might not turn and flee.

A minute after, and she heard the door close slowly. This was followed by the scraping of the wooden bolt in the socket, and then all was silent.

For a minute or two she hid her face in Wyn's fever-hot clothes and sobbed despairingly. But she was not a soldier's daughter for nothing, and though her courage was somewhat under a cloud, it was there all the same, and would wax stronger with exercise.

Besides, right down under the despair, a little

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germ of hope grew strong and vigorous. She did not believe that Musef would let her go unsuccoured. And help would certainly come from somewhere, for God was in heaven, and her own dear mother was there with Him. That, for the present, was assurance enough, and with it she could rest content.

Wyn had dropped into an uneasy slumber, and she laid him gently down in the rugs in which he was wrapped, taking care to so shield his face that no marauding crow could get so much as a passing glimpse of it, and then she went to see what she could do for Juliet, who, tightly swathed in rugs, was moaning continuously.

"Poor dear, you would feel better if I could untwist you a little," she said compassionately, for Juliet's arms were bound firmly down to her sides, and she had no power to extricate herself.

With great difficulty Chrissie at length succeeded in freeing her, and having rolled up one of the rugs in the shape of a pillow, put it under her head.

By this time Wyn was awake and crying fretfully; and, lifting him in her arms, Chrissie paced to and fro in the echoing verandah, crooning over the hymns her mother had taught her, until, having wailed until he was exhausted, he fell asleep again.

The sun poured with a fierce heat into the courtyard all day, but there was more air than in the stuffy little house from which they had been taken, and Juliet, ill though she was, seemed the better for it. Once, towards sunset, Chrissie believed her to be conscious, but she soon relapsed into delirium

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again, babbling of the ravens that fed Elijah, and the miraculous draught of fishes—her fancies turning all the time upon the interpositions of Providence on behalf of those in distress as set forth in Holy Writ.

All through the day Chrissie had watched in fear and trembling for evidences of snakes, which might be looked for, she supposed, in the nooks and crannies of the decaying walls. But, with all her apprehensions, she had seen nothing more frightful than a family of spotted lizards, and two or three enormous toads, and though these were not perhaps pleasant companions, they were not dangerous, and she could face the night without any very severe terror at the prospect.

When the sun went down and darkness fell, the cold became intense, and she was glad to walk about to keep warm, appreciating for the first time the fortunate panic of the priests, which had caused them to muffle Wyn and Juliet in so many rugs to prevent them from spreading the infection as they were carried through the town to the big temple.

The discovery of the nature of the disease had been brought about in this way. The mysterious visitors, who had appeared to bring them food when the rajah's dole was stopped, were priests from the big temple, who laid offerings at the feet of the white strangers, believing them to be devotees of Lukshmee. This goddess, being a wife of Vishnu, was worshipped by the frequenters of the big temple. These men came again with their offerings in the dawn following the night visit of Musef, and, finding traces of the greatly-dreaded scourge

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on both sufferers, promptly betrayed them to the authorities, with the result that they were at once carried off to the court-of-the-doomed, for fear lest the plague might spread and destroy the town.

Gwen and Jessie had wept and bewailed, but Chrissie, fighting desperately with the men who tried to take Wyn from her, had at last settled the matter by carrying him herself to the prison where they were to be left to die.

Her greatest horror during this first night in the court-of-the-doomed was the number of human bones, the mortal remains of former prisoners, that lay scattered here and there, where the victims had succumbed to disease or starvation, or both. Wherever she turned her gaze in the darkness she seemed to see a grisly skull obtruding itself on her vision, or a fleshless arm making ghostly overtures to her.

The only consolation she had was the nestling of little Wyn against her wildly fluttering heart, for the ravings of Juliet were almost as eerie in the darkness as the companionship of the voiceless bones.

The lagging hours crept on, and the time of dawning drew near. Juliet's ravings had sunk to fitful incoherent mutterings now, and Chrissie was dozing, and dreaming of the bungalow at Rampoostan.

But she started up broad awake on hearing a sibilant whisper from somewhere up above. She thought at first it was an angel, but its hill-gutturals proclaimed its origin to be of the earth

"Is the missi-baba there?"

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"I am here. Who speaks?" she asked, trembling so violently that she could scarcely hold Wyn.

"It is Musef, the grateful one. Is the missi-baba well?"

"Yes, yes, dear Musef, I am quite well; and oh, I am so glad to hear you speak!" cried Chrissie eagerly.

"Musef has brought food for the imprisoned ones. In a water-skin she has packed the things, and she will return with more to-morrow," whispered Narudu's mother, whose gratitude for past kindness had already borne such rich and abundant fruit.

"Where is it? And, Musef, where are you?" asked Chrissie, in a bewildered tone.

"Musef is on the roof. The water-skin is coming down at the end of a cord; will the missi-baba please to untie the cord and let me pull it up again?"

Chrissie moved aside hastily as a big black bundle slowly descended, alighting just on the spot where she had been standing. It was a work of some difficulty to fumble successfully with the knots in the darkness, but they were all undone at last, and Musef drew the cord up with a jerk.

"How is the poor sick mem-sahib and the infant?" queried the woman, in the same piercing whisper that cut the air so sharply and seemed to strike the ear from two ways at once.

"She is very ill, poor dear, and seems not to know anything, but little Wyn has slept fairly well. Oh, Musef, what shall I do if they die?" and Chrissie's voice broke in a sob of bitter distress.

"They will not die, Lukshmee will not let them;

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the poor sick mem was so good to Busshu, who hath lost his fever, and is getting well. Besides, all the white-faced ones have been sent away to-day on their way back to the bosom of Kaiser-i-Hind, and they will tell the tidings to the strong soldiers who fight for the great White Queen; then they will come and will deliver the captives who languish in the court-of-the-doomed."

"Oh, Musef, do you really think they will?" cried Chrissie, comforted in spite of herself.

"Of a surety the children of Kaiser-i-Hind are not left to perish, for she is a good and a merciful mother, caring for her women-children as well as for her sons," Musef whispered in a soothing tone. And then again bidding the missi-baba not lose heart, she went her way, and Chrissie was alone with the sufferers once more.

But there was a difference in the loneliness now, and, comforted and cheered in spite of herself, she crept to the side of Juliet, and, clasping Wyn closely in her arms, fell peacefully asleep.

It was not long that she dared to slumber. Soon after sunrise the crows were hopping about the court-yard again, peering with beady, covetous eyes at the prostrate figures on the ground. Chrissie drove them away with much flapping of her frock and shoo-shooing, but they did not seem much frightened by this show of hostilities, returning again and again to flop down with a harsh croak on the stones beside the invalids.

Chrissie longed for missiles with which to pelt them, but there was nothing but the bones, and she could not bring herself to touch those; the very

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thought of it made her shiver and tremble as with an ague.

Hour after hour she sat by her charges, or made little journeys to the fountain in the middle of the court-yard for water with which to bathe their hot hands and faces. The precious store of drinking-water and the provisions brought by Musef were arranged close at hand under shadow of the verandah roof, and she had at least the satisfaction of having her cares in small compass.

But the weariness of her solitude was awful, and Juliet grew worse as the day wore on. Sometimes she seemed conscious that Chrissie was about her, and once murmured, "Thank you, dear;" but more often her mind was wandering, and her mutterings were still all about wonderful deliverances and strange rescues from impending peril.

CHAPTER XX.

A WHISPER OF HOPE.

THE Great Nom was disposed to be very civil to his uninvited guests after his first angry outburst at their want of faith in his statements had somewhat cooled down.

He even went so far as to offer them the hospitality of his own house during their stay in the city, stating that the rajah would doubtless have thrown his palace open for their entertainment had

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he not unfortunately been out of town on a short sojourn at one of his country seats.

This last statement was an evolution of the wuzeer's active imagination, as the rajah was safely shut up in his palace at that precise moment, vexing his troubled soul with the still unsolved problem of his domestic difficulties. True, he had sent his two most troublesome wives to Alipahr as a gift to the exacting White Queen in place of the prisoners who had been shut up to await death in the court-of-the-doomed, but since the leaders of revolt had been banished, others had taken their places as disturbers of his peace, and the poor man was harassed almost out of his life.

Major Felton distrusted the Great Nom's profuse overtures of friendliness, and signified that he would prefer to dwell in tents outside the gates during the time he remained in Ramoor. He also avowed his intention of staying until he could have an audience of the rajah, for whom he brought a message from the White Queen.

The Great Nom assured him, in the most felicitous terms of which he was master, that nothing would make him happier than to have the brave warriors of Kaiser-i-Hind dwelling in peace at his gates. But the wizened little rogue looked so manifestly anxious and uncomfortable all the time, that the major had a shrewd suspicion as to the reality of his protestations, and was more than ever confirmed in his determination to sit down and quietly await developments.

He requested the wuzeer to place tents at their disposal, his own supply of canvas being too limited

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for more than temporary use. And in a short time a flaunting blue-and-yellow marquee was pitched just outside the gates, and hard by the well where Chrissie and Jessie had helped Musef to fill the place of Busshu when he was taken sick.

Several smaller tents kept the large one company, and Mrs. Boyd came out of her swoon to find herself lying on a pile of cushions in a roomy canvas apartment, the furnishing of which had a strange, heathenish look to her, especially the idol, a figurative presentment of the Sacred Ox, which stood on its own little pedestal near the tent door, with a low stool in front, on which the offerings were to be laid.

There was no one present when she recovered consciousness, but shortly afterwards the major came in to see how she fared and to tell her his plans.

"Nothing is to be gained by haste, of that I am certain. On the other hand, we must not delay when the time comes for action. Are you afraid of catching small-pox, Mrs. Boyd?" he asked abruptly.

"Am I afraid of anything, even death itself, if only I may clasp my child in my arms again?" she exclaimed with such unrepressed fierceness of manner that the major admitted to himself privately he was more than half afraid of her when she was in these moods.

"Very good, then. I propose to spy out the city, night by night, and when we have discovered the exact location of this court-of-the-doomed I shall enter it by force, and see for myself what has become of the sufferers."

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"But how can you spy out the place? you are white, everyone will know you," asked Mrs. Boyd in a petulant tone. The word "waiting" was absolutely hateful to her, for she had waited so long, and to such little purpose too.

He smiled reassuringly, and a minute later blew a little whistle hanging from his watch-chain, whereupon a dirty, hang-dog sort of a native appeared. He made a rough salaam to the lady, and then stood in a bowed, weary fashion waiting for orders.

"Can you get into the city before the gates are closed for the night?" asked Major Felton in English.

The weary figure became even more limp and inert as the native replied in unintelligible gutturals that he could.

"But he—where did you pick him up?" she asked in great astonishment.

Major Felton looked steadily at the dirty, bowed figure, and gave a little nod of command, whereupon the man became suddenly alert and vigorous, holding his head in an erect, soldierly pose, whilst his face fairly beamed with intelligence.

"Nikoo?" gasped the astonished lady, hardly able to believe the evidence of her senses.

"Yes, Nikoo; makes up well, doesn't he?" and Major Felton stood, his head slightly on one side, admiring the result of his handiwork.

"But what will he do when he gets into the city amongst all the people?" Mrs. Boyd asked.

"Have his supper probably, then chew pan, or smoke, according to the custom of the society in

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which he finds himself, and keep his ears open," retorted the major, his tone unconsciously cold and stern, for he, too, was finding the waiting hard to be borne.

Mrs. Boyd did not reply to this, and after another pause, Nikoo, having subsided into his previous limp attitude, slunk noiselessly away again.

"Will he do anything? Can he?" she asked when the man had gone, and only the major remained standing in the entrance to the tent, and looking as if he meant also to take his departure.

"There was nothing else to be done, and when that is the case it is a great temptation to try methods of doubtful utility," he replied in a formal, precise manner, put on to hide the unrest underlying his outward calm. He had never flinched in battle yet, or even felt any desire to run away from an enemy; but he had turned coward now, and feared the ending of suspense with the gloomiest of apprehensions.

It was almost three weeks since Juliet and Wyn had been carried to the court-of-the-doomed, and Chrissie had voluntarily suffered the same imprisonment. Without succour of some kind they must long since have perished miserably, and it was the thought of their possible suffering that came so near to unmanning him now.

No one had much appetite for supper that night, and when it was over the men lounged on the ground, smoking their pipes in moody silence. The major was nowhere to be seen; and Mrs. Boyd sat in the tent door, pressing her hands tightly over her throbbing heart as she gazed in impotent

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yearning upon the city which held her youngest-born imprisoned or dead within its walls.

The well, with its clumsy water-wheel, interested her scarcely at all, so that she failed to see how one of the veiled figures, pushing at the great bar that turned the wheel, was looking in her direction. Even had she noticed it, she would probably have put the action down to curiosity, pure and simple, and so dismissed it from her thoughts.

Slowly and monotonously the great bar was swung round, creaking and groaning with odd, weird noises, until sunset fell, and the tired women were free to rest until dawn should drag them forth to their toil once more.

More sick at heart and hopeless than she had been at any time since leaving Alipahr, Mrs. Boyd was about to fling herself on the pile of cushions that formed her bed, when a movement just outside the tent door caught her ear and made her start nervously. Her first thought was that a snake had chanced to take a stroll in that direction, for in the lowlands round Ramoor, spring was quite sufficiently advanced to have produced an abundant crop of those undesirable visitors already.

Lifting her lamp to discover what manner of intruder it was, she was amazed to find a female figure crouched on the ground, and wriggling along with almost as much agility as the dreaded snake.

She started back, a very natural ejaculation of surprise on her lips, but it was not voiced, for the crawling figure stopped suddenly, making a mute gesture of appeal for silence; and, forcing herself to

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be quiet and raise no alarm, Mrs. Boyd waited for the woman to approach.

One of the soldiers was doing sentinel duty on that side of the cluster of tents, and seeing Mrs. Boyd standing with the lamp in her hand, asked if anything was the matter.

"Nothing, thank you," she answered in a calm tone, although her heart was beating furiously with mingled hope and fear.

As she stood before the entrance to her tent, the woman on the ground was hidden from the sentinel on the other side, and she dared not move, not even so much as to turn round and put her lamp down, until he had passed, lest the motion should betray the prostrate woman, who lay beyond in the shadow of the tent.

A moment the man lingered, as though suspicious of something out of order, and then he walked on, and a little later Mrs. Boyd heard his voice again as he met and challenged his fellow-sentinel.

With a quick movement she stepped into her tent again, beckoning to the woman to follow. The man would be back in a moment, she knew, as the two patrolled in a circle, meeting at the halves, and turning back to meet again.

The woman seemed equally alive to the necessity for haste, and scrambled with a quiet movement through the opening in the canvas wall.

She rose to her feet when she was once inside, and Mrs. Boyd had dropped the canvas flap that did duty for the door.

"Who are you? what do you want?" the lady

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asked, hardly able to speak for the beating of her heart.

In her agitation she had spoken in English, but the woman replied in Urdu. "I have come from the captives in the court-of-the-doomed. They must be succoured at once, and silently, or it will be too late."

Not all at once could Mrs. Boyd gather the sense of this statement, her knowledge of Urdu being far from proficient. But when, by dint of much repetition, the truth at length dawned upon her, she was in such a state of tremulous agitation as to be almost incapable of anything but voiceless sobs of incredulous relief and joy.

"At once and in silence," repeated the woman urgently; and finding that Mrs. Boyd still lingered, overmastered by her emotion, she ventured to lay a brown, skinny hand of entreaty on the lady's arm. "It must be at once, and in silence, if the mem would have her man-child again," she said even more impressively than before.

Mrs. Boyd choked back another almost overpowering burst of sobs, and mentally called herself a hard name or two for her weakness. "Wait here one moment," she said; "I must tell Major Felton, the big sahib who has brought us here."

"Him missi-baba's father?" asked the woman, whilst a wide-reaching grin of delight spread over her face, and she dropped contentedly upon the ground to await the issue of events.

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CHAPTER XXI.

THE GREAT NOM'S REVENGE.

CHRISSIE sat on the ground, with her hands clasped round her knees, looking up into the quiet night sky.

She was very hungry and very tired, having been on the watch nearly the whole of the previous night, in the hope that Musef would come and would bring them food. But she had not appeared, and the supply of provisions had dwindled to a small fig and a scrap of dry, unappetizing biscuit, which Juliet and Chrissie had by common consent put aside for Wyn, in case no food should be brought to them before morning.

Juliet was better, having had the disease very lightly, whilst Wyn had been poorly for a few days only. They might have had small-pox certainly, but if they had, it was in an unusually mild form, and they would have been quite well again by this time if only decent comforts and nourishment could have been obtained.

Sometimes Musef was able to bring them quite an ample supply of food of good quality; at others she had to go hungry herself in order that they might not starve. The Lukshmee had failed to bring the little household all the good they expected from it, and misfortune dogged their steps, threatening to overwhelm them.

Busshu was better, but he had lost his few fields, and with them the means of subsistence, because he

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had failed to pay his water dues to the rajah during the time of his sickness. Rendered into plain English, Busshu had offended the Great Nom, and with him the numerous priests of the Sacred Ox, by daring to set up an alien goddess in the highway to their temple.

For this, persecution of the pettiest dogged his steps. His enemies did not dare to work openly for fear of encountering the resentment of the priests of the big temple, who had taken the Lukshmee into their own sanctuary, and would promptly resent anything of the sort, and might even influence the mind of the rajah against his devoted servant the wuzeer.

So Busshu was cast adrift to beg or to perish, and managed to gain sufficient food to keep himself from starving by sweeping the steps of the temple, and washing the feet of the idol that adorned the entrance.

Musef did her part right well, good and capable wife that she was, and the little household might have breasted the storm in spite of everything, had it not been for the heavy burden of finding food for the three captives in the court-of-the-doomed.

Some days Musef earned the money to buy them food. Some days she begged it, and on one or two occasions, when neither earning nor begging availed to obtain the necessary supplies, she had deliberately stolen fruit and meal from the Great Nom's kitchen to feed the helpless three who were dependent on her bounty.

But this state of affairs could not go on for ever; and as a crowning catastrophe Musef had discovered

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that her steps were being dogged by an evil-minded fellow, who was confidential servant to the Great Nom, and always employed by him when there was any spying to be done, or any poor wretch to be hunted down and brought to book for some real or fancied misdemeanour.

She had confided this uncomfortable information to Chrissie when she came two nights ago, and since then the poor child had been the victim of the liveliest apprehensions.

Juliet had tried in vain to get the nature of her trouble from her, but on this point Chrissie was not disposed to be confidential. So Juliet had gone to sleep when night came, with Wyn rolled snugly in her arms, and Chrissie was left alone for her vigil.

The hours passed very slowly. Sometimes a night bird with flapping wings would pass over the court-yard, or the howl of a jackal would reach her ears, but that was all; and every hour as it passed left her more heart-sick and hungry.

Then, after what seemed almost an endless time of waiting, she heard a muffled scraping on the roof above, and listened in breathless silence for Musef to ask if she was awake.

But there was more than one person up there, apparently, for she heard more rustling and scraping, with some whispering. A panic of terror seized her at this, and she was ready to scream in the anguish of her fear. She had been learning caution in a hard school lately, however, and so uttered no sound, only crept close to Juliet and awakened her by a touch on the arm.

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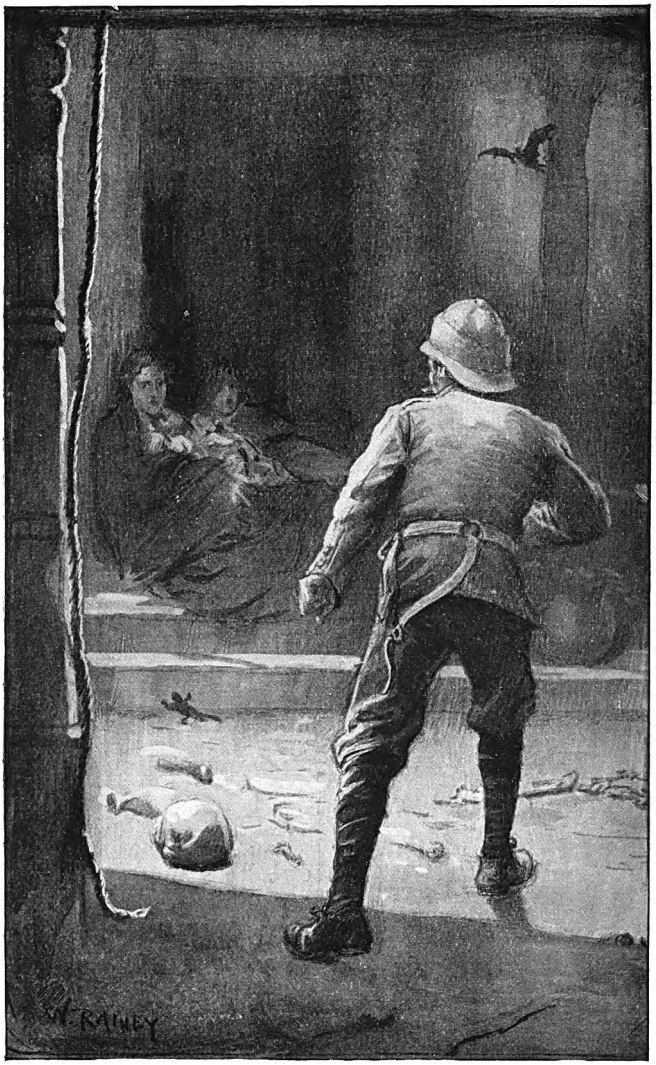

M 533

"CHRISSIE, CHRISSIE, ARE YOU HERE, CHILD?"

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"Hush!" she breathed, as Juliet stirred and awoke.

"What is it, dear, what has frightened you?" Juliet whispered, feeling how Chrissie was trembling.

"Hush!" Chrissie's hands tightened on Juliet's arm with a clutch that almost made her cry out as a dark body came swiftly down from the roof above, and, reaching the ground, resolved itself into a man, who had been lowered by a rope.

The two, clinging to each other, scarcely breathed, but Wyn slept on in utter unconsciousness of anything out of the usual order of things. And the man, whoever he was, stood still and listened.

"Chrissie, Chrissie, are you here, child?" he asked in a low voice that was hardly above a whisper.

"Father?" The wonder, the yearning, and the disbelief in Chrissie's exclamation were pitiful to hear; an irrepressible sob broke from Juliet at the sound, but the man took a step forward and caught his child in his arms.

"Father, father! Oh, it seems too good to be true!" Chrissie cried, twining her arms tightly round his neck, smothering his face with kisses, and murmuring exclamations of delight and satisfaction all the time.

Juliet had struggled to a sitting posture, and the tears were running down her face like rain, but it was too dark for anyone to see them, and so it did not matter at all.

"Where is Miss Boyd?" asked the major, gently disengaging himself from Chrissie's clinging arms.

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"I am here," Juliet answered, her voice very unsteady by reason of her emotion. "But you must not come near me, please, for fear of infection."

"We must risk that for once, I am afraid, especially as you must be got away from here without delay. Where is the baby? I had better take him first," the major said, drawing the rope forward by which he had been lowered, and at the same time giving a low whistle as a signal to those above.

"Oh, no!" interposed Juliet hastily; "he would cry so dreadfully if he awoke amongst strangers. Take Chrissie first, please, and come back for Wyn."

"That is good sense," retorted the major, speaking in a hurried tone. "Come, Chrissie, there is not a moment to be lost; and, dear child, don't speak above a whisper."

He drew Chrissie forward, and then she saw that there was a basket on the end of the rope. Into this she was squeezed, at least as much of her as would go in, and then, adjuring her to hold tightly to the rope, the major lifted her and the basket as high as he could reach, whilst someone above hauled her higher still and out of Juliet's sight.

There was a moment or two of strained waiting whilst Chrissie and her basket were bumped and scraped up the steep slope of the roof, and then a pause of silence, followed by the rustling of the basket as it was let quickly down again.

"Now, Miss Boyd, your turn next. Will you take the small boy, or shall I bring him?" the major asked, seizing the basket in one hand and laying hold of Juliet with the other.

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"I will take him, please," she said, her breath coming in quick pants of excitement and distress at the thought of the journey up the roof in the frail basket that dangled at the end of the rope.

But there was no other way, and she submitted to being packed in as Chrissie had been, the major taking off his belt in order to bind Wyn firmly to her.

"Now, courage; it is only for three minutes or so," he said in a whisper; and then, signalling to those above, he lifted her with a strong upward spring, and the journey was begun.

She clung with all her might to the rope, which luckily felt thick and strong, as, bumping and creaking, she and Wyn were dragged up and up until it seemed almost as if she must lose her hold and fall from very giddiness.

Then a strong arm seized the rope. She was dragged forcibly in through an opening in the wall to a denser darkness still. Someone lifted her out of the basket, and Chrissie's voice whispered congratulations in her ear.

It was marvellous how the small baronet slept through all the movement and tumbling about of the transit from prison to freedom. But sleep he did, and that without even a murmur, though he did give a sigh of sleepy satisfaction when the major, having followed the others up from below, unfastened the belt binding the little fellow to Juliet, and put him in Chrissie's arms for the remainder of the journey.

"Can you walk?" said the kind voice of her rescuer in her ear, "or shall I carry you?"

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"Oh, I can walk quite well, thank you," Juliet protested hastily; but she trembled so much that the major gave her no time to make the trial, but, picking her up in his arms as if she had been a baby like Wyn, bade them lead on.

Someone, Juliet could not see who, was leading the way, followed by Chrissie carrying Wyn. After these walked a man like a native; only when he turned she saw the gleam of a revolver barrel in the momentary light of a lucifer match, and from that guessed that he was no denizen of Beshawur. It was a perilous journey that they were making, skirting the edges of flat roofs and walking on the tops of walls like the ubiquitous cat. Juliet shivered as she looked down and realized what a fall might mean, then wisely shut her eyes lest some involuntary start or tremor on her part might cause her rescuer to lose his balance.

They came to a halt presently, and there was some whispering among those in front. Juliet opened her eyes at this, and a moment later Major Felton put her on her feet once more.

"Where are we?" she asked, trembling still, for she was very weak yet and nervous from her illness and the privations she had gone through.

"We are on the town wall, and about to descend into the town ditch. Keep a brave heart, Miss Boyd, and then, if all goes well, you shall look your last on Ramoor," he said cheerfully.

Propping her against the wall for the better support of her unsteady feet, he stepped forward to assist the others in getting that very useful basket into working order again.

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Wyn uttered a fretful cry just as Chrissie and he, bound together with the major's belt, were being lowered over the ditch into the foul-smelling darkness.

"That young man may upset our arrangements after all if we don't take care," muttered the major in an anxious tone.

"He is so hungry, poor mite, and we forgot to bring that one little fig which we had saved for him," Juliet murmured in apology for Wyn's indiscretion in voicing his woes at this inconvenient season.

"Of course, of course! I might have remembered, but we have had to hurry so much that there has been no time for anything," replied the major, diving with his free hand in one of his pockets (he was holding the rope steady with the other). "Here are some biscuits, rather smashed, I am afraid, but better than nothing. Give him some when you get down there, Miss Boyd, and have some yourself."

Juliet took the bag with eager fingers, and could scarcely resist the temptation to sample the contents forthwith, so very hungry was she. But the basket was hauled up by the major at that minute, and it was her turn to go next. She was just about to follow when he caught a firm grip of her hand.

"Hist, look there!" he said sharply.

She did look, and could scarcely restrain a cry of dismay at the sight. It was less dark than it had been, and two or three roofs away she saw several figures rise from the darkness and go creeping away in the direction from which they had come.

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"Wyn has given the alarm, and now we shall have to run for it. If he cries out again we shall probably have to fight for it as well," he whispered in explanation as he stowed her in the basket with more haste than gentleness; but this was easily condoned in the circumstances, and she endured her bruises without so much as a groan of protest.

Down, down, down went the basket, the stench from the ditch rising up to meet her and almost overpowering her, used though she was, since her residence in Ramoor, to odours many and various. With a frantic clutch she held on to the rope, expecting every moment to be precipitated into the ditch.

No such evil fate overtook her, however. The basket dropped on to solid ground with a bump, and the ditch was still below.

The man with the revolver pulled her out of the basket with hardly more gentleness than the major had shown in stowing her in, and hurried her under the shadow of an overhanging bit of the wall. The reason for this was obvious, as the major slid down the rope a moment later, dropping on the exact spot from which she had just before been dragged.

"Where are the others?" she asked, staring round in perplexity, for the gloom was dense, and she could scarcely see her hand when she held it up before her face.

"Not far off. Now, Nikoo, are you ready?" the major asked sharply, turning from her to the man with the revolver. "The alarm has been raised, and we may find ourselves outwitted yet."

Wyn cried out again, sharper than before this

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time, and from the sound Juliet judged that he and Chrissie were on the other side of the ditch, though how they had got there she could by no means guess.

"Mem-sahib ready?" asked the man; and before Juliet could frame a reply, he had seized her and jumped down into the bottom-horror of that awful sewer, and, holding her above the muddy water, waded across and planted her high and dry on the opposite bank.

"Miss Boyd, where are you?" whispered Chrissie; and Juliet, as cautiously replying, found that they were close together again, standing on the brink of the ditch.

Wyn was struggling and squirming under the shawl Chrissie had twisted round him, and preparing for a lusty shout of protest, when Juliet stuffed some biscuit into his mouth, and effectually diverted his attention for a time.

"Musef has gone to warn the others," Chrissie said in a hurried whisper.

"Was that Musef?" asked Juliet in great surprise.

"Yes; didn't you know? It was Musef who saved us, and that man is one of the soldiers who came with father from Alipahr."

There was no time for more. Major Felton having got across the ditch, they were hurried away over a field or two until they reached a grove of trees.

Wyn had been transferred to the arms of Nikoo, and had not protested by so much as a whimper, his attention being still absorbed by the biscuits.

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"My baby! my precious one!" cried a voice ecstatically, and a figure darted out of the shadow thrown by the trees and flung its arms about the astonished infant.

"Who—who is that?" gasped Juliet. She was panting and breathless already from the hurry of their escape, and scarcely in a condition for any more surprises.

"It is Mrs. Boyd. And she has roused the place with a vengeance now!" exclaimed the major, as Wyn, resenting the vigorous overtures of the unknown, burst into loud crying, sobbing out his indignant protests in a manner well calculated to rouse the sleeping city.

"Stop him! stop him as quickly as possible!" adjured the major; and Juliet, hurrying forward, took him from his mother.

"There, there, my pretty, have another biscuit, will you?" she said coaxingly; but he only howled the louder, and struggled to get to Chrissie, who was close beside Juliet.

"Take him, Chrissie, for a minute until we mount; he may be quieter with you. Now, Mrs. Boyd, let us be moving, if you please. That small son of yours will be in a more amiable mood presently," interposed the major, just as Mrs. Boyd was going to burst into a torrent of weeping because her son had forgotten all about her.

"Him wuzeer's men waked up now," said Nikoo sententiously with a backward glance at the city as they groped their way through the clustering tree stems to where the horses waited on the other side.

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Juliet looked back at this, seeing torches flaring in the distance, whilst hoarse shouts sounded in the direction from which they had come.

"Oh, they are in pursuit!" she panted, stumbling in her haste and falling over a tree root.

"Mem-sahib need not fear. Him wuzeer's men can't run," said Nikoo, picking her up and setting her on her feet again.

The horses were waiting close at hand—six of the best—and, though somewhat worn with the rapid travel of the past four days, they were still capable of a spurt if required.

Mrs. Boyd had thought better of her disposition to tears, and clambered on to her horse with the assistance of a soldier, who afterwards mounted his own animal, taking Musef behind him pillion-wise. Chrissie was accommodated in like manner behind another of the troop. Nikoo took Wyn in his arms, riding in front to lead the way, whilst Juliet was perched behind the major upon the big black horse, which reared and pranced with unabated energy and ferocity.

No sooner were they in motion and creeping cautiously along in the shadow of the trees than ping! ping! a bullet whizzed past Juliet's face, so closely that she could feel the wind on her cheek as it flew by.

They broke into a gallop then, being in no position to return the fire, encumbered as they were with the women and little Wyn, the black horse dancing along in the wildest exuberance of spirits, having to be held in with a tight rein to prevent him from distancing all the others.

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For the better part of an hour the speed was kept up, but by the end of that time, the moon having risen and shown no pursuers behind, they slowed down to a walking pace, and Chrissie remembered how hungry she was.

"How did you know all about us, father?" she asked, making her escort walk his horse close to the major's big black one that she might be within talking distance of her father.

"It was your friend Musef who brought the information. She came creeping into camp on all-fours, poor creature, to tell us of a vile plot that had been hatched by the wuzeer, to throw her, her husband and child, into the court-of-the-doomed to-night, and then to fall upon our camp and cut the lot of us to pieces."

"What for?" demanded Chrissie, who was practical, and liked to have a reason for things.

"Revenge, I suppose. He seems to have a very strong prejudice against Miss Boyd, or, as he calls her, 'the woman-of-the-froward-tongue', and finding that Musef had kept you from starving, decided that she and her belongings should suffer for their misdoings in company with you. Then we appeared on the scene, and Nikoo, going disguised as a country-fellow from the neighbourhood into the city last evening, was so fortunate as to overhear a part of the Great Nom's little scheme, and, coming back with the news to us, we were able to forestall it by an hour or so."

"But Busshu and Narudu, where are they?" asked Chrissie in accents of horror. She had such an intimate acquaintance with the court-of-the-doomed

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herself as to feel keen sympathy with any other sufferer in like case.

"They are ahead of us, mounted on a baggage-donkey, and accompanied by that prince of usurers, Lal Musjid," the major answered. "It took some managing to get everyone safely away, especially as the horses were tired. But we have done pretty well so far. The sentinels were to remain posted until the moon rose, challenging each other, for the benefit of the town, and then they were to follow us as fast as they could."

"I can't believe we are free even yet," Chrissie said with a deep-drawn sigh of relief.

"I can. Only I wish the earth and the sky wouldn't get mixed up so dreadfully; I can hardly tell which is which," Juliet said in a dreamy tone. Then rousing herself a little she went on: "It is almost worth while to have endured the captivity for the joy that comes in being rescued."

"Him Busshu man in front, way yonder," called Nikoo, who was riding forward.

Two donkeys, accompanied by men on horseback, were faintly to be seen now some distance ahead on the track, but before they could be overtaken sounds of horses ridden hard were heard from behind, and in a short time the sentinels who had been left rode up.

"What news?" asked the major, as they drew rein and saluted.

"The whole place is alive; they are running about and shrieking like demons," said the foremost of the men, who was an Englishman from the neighbourhood of Evington Towers.

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"Are they after us?" asked the major again, his voice sterner now.

"They were, but we left a few lying by the way," replied the man.

"We must press on as fast as we can go now, for as matters are we stand between two fires, the men of Ramoor behind, and the Kajid mercenaries in front, or at the side, as the case may be," the major said.

"I'd rather have to face the Kajids and be killed outright, than be dragged back to that dreadful Ramoor," said Juliet.

"And yet those people were ready to kneel down and worship you when you stuck the Lukshmee up in Busshu's house," laughed Chrissie, whose spirits were rising rapidly.

"But see what came of it," Juliet retorted, and a cold shiver of remembrance crept over her.

Even as she spoke the sun was coming up in the east, and the first crimson flush of dawn edged the parting curtains of night.

"Look!" said the major in a solemn tone, "'weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning'."

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CHAPTER XXII.

THE END.

TWO years had passed away since the rescue of the captives from the court-of-the-doomed in Ramoor, and Mrs. Boyd was entertaining a family party at Evington Towers.

Very changed and greatly subdued by her sorrows was Mrs. Boyd, and though her mien was haughty still, and she carried her head with its old erectness, her face wore a sweeter, more chastened expression, and her eyes had lost their former hard look.

Gwen and Jessie, taller and more angular than ever, were with their mother in the drawing-room, where she waited to receive her guests; and a moment later young Sir Wyndham appeared in charge of a nurse.

The small baronet had long since recovered from the effects of his imprisonment in Ramoor, and was as healthy and robust as the most anxious of mothers could desire. In speech he was still unusually backward, never giving anyone a full name when a fragment would suffice, addressing Mrs. Boyd as "Mum", and keeping the old name of "Is-is-is" for Chrissie Felton, his good angel in the past.

He began to clamour for her now, rushing across the big drawing-room to his mother's chair of state and asking why Is-is-is had not come yet.

"Here she is, Wyn, you won't have long to

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wait!" exclaimed Jessie from the window, as a carriage swept round the drive and disappeared in the direction of the hall door.

He shouted in jubilation at this, retreating in the direction of the door once more in order to greet Chrissie the sooner. Mrs. Boyd rose in almost nervous haste, as if she shared her small son's anxiety to welcome her guests.

A moment later and the door opened, admitting Chrissie Felton and the old man her grandfather.

Chrissie was taller and older in appearance than when she had defied the priests of the big temple, but otherwise she was not altered. Whilst her grandfather talked to Mrs. Boyd she was being hugged and kissed in rapturous delight by Wyn, who loved her better than anyone else in the world, even his mother not excepted.

Again the door opened, and this time it was Major Felton and Juliet who entered. She was Mrs. Felton now, and as Chrissie's stepmother would find it easy to carry out the task of caring for the child, whose own mother lay in that far-off grave, under the tamarisk bushes at Rampoostan.

Juliet had a letter in her hand as she came forward to greet her sister-in-law, and there was an amused smile hovering about her lips. "The Indian mail came in as we were starting, Emily, and we brought the letters along with us," she said.

Mrs. Boyd shuddered slightly, as she was apt to do when India was mentioned in her presence, but she forced herself to ask: "Is there news of Rampoostan?"

"Yes," replied Juliet, dropping the letter and

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picking it up again, while the smile broadened into a laugh: "Miss Ferrars is my correspondent, and she says that Busshu has set up in business in quite a large way, thanks to your munificence, Emily, and Musef is resplendent in bangles and anklets of real gold. But an evil fate dogs Lal Musjid, who is extremely unpopular. He has quarrelled with Shan Dal Devi too, and the sharper rogue has despoiled the other, with the result that Lal Musjid has taken to professional mendicancy."

"He deserves no better fate," replied Mrs. Boyd in a hard tone.

"That is precisely my opinion, Mrs. Boyd, only at the Grange I find myself in a minority of one," said Major Felton, with a reproachful shake of the head at his wife. "An old rogue such as Lal Musjid learns but by personal experience the nature and extent of his own sins towards other people in the past."

"I don't think I should be very sorry for the Great Nom if anything bad were to happen to him, but I don't like other people to be in trouble," remarked Chrissie, who was still being vigorously embraced by Sir Wyndham.

"Dinner is served, madam," announced the butler, flinging wide the door.

It was a family gathering, and even the young baronet was to be present at the meal, a circumstance which he was loudly commenting on in rather incoherent language, as he led the way to the dining-room with his beloved Is-is-is by his side.

Mrs. Boyd and old Mr. Felton came next, followed by Gwen and Jessie, whilst Major Felton, in

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defiance of all known rules of etiquette, brought up the rear with Juliet on his arm.

"I think," said Mrs. Boyd softly, as they gathered round the table, "that I can even be at peace with the Great Nom, since, in spite of all the anguish of apprehension that came before, I found my baby safe, with not even so much as a scratch upon him."

"Yes," said Major Felton, "we sought for our lost ones, and found them at last in the City of God."

THE END.

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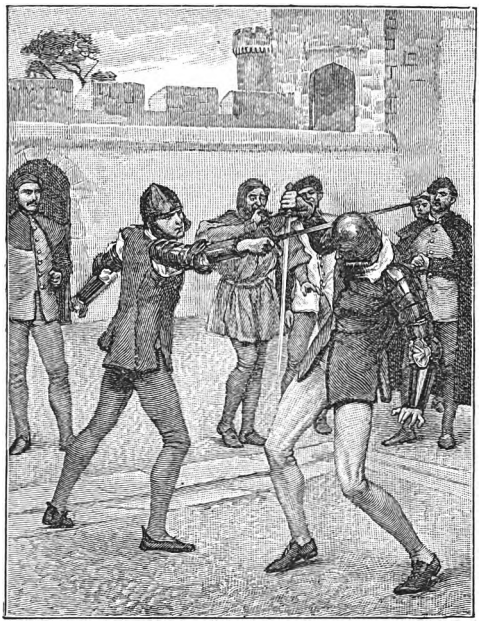

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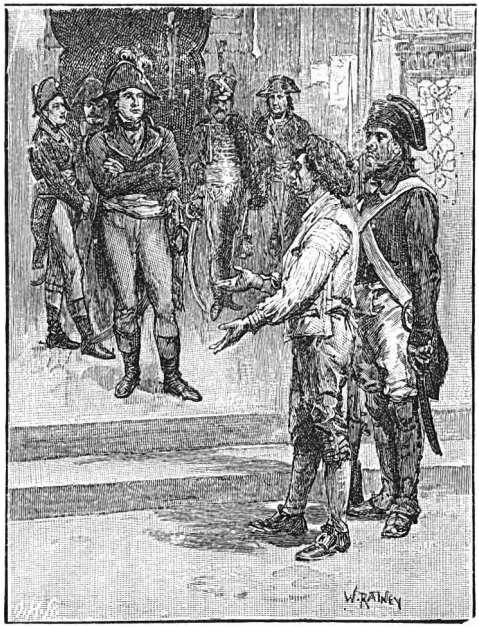

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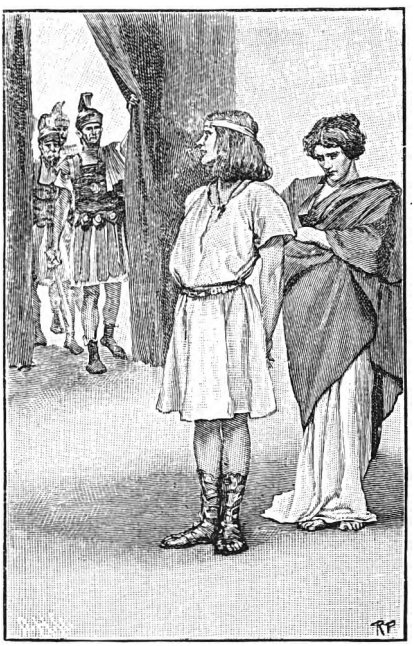

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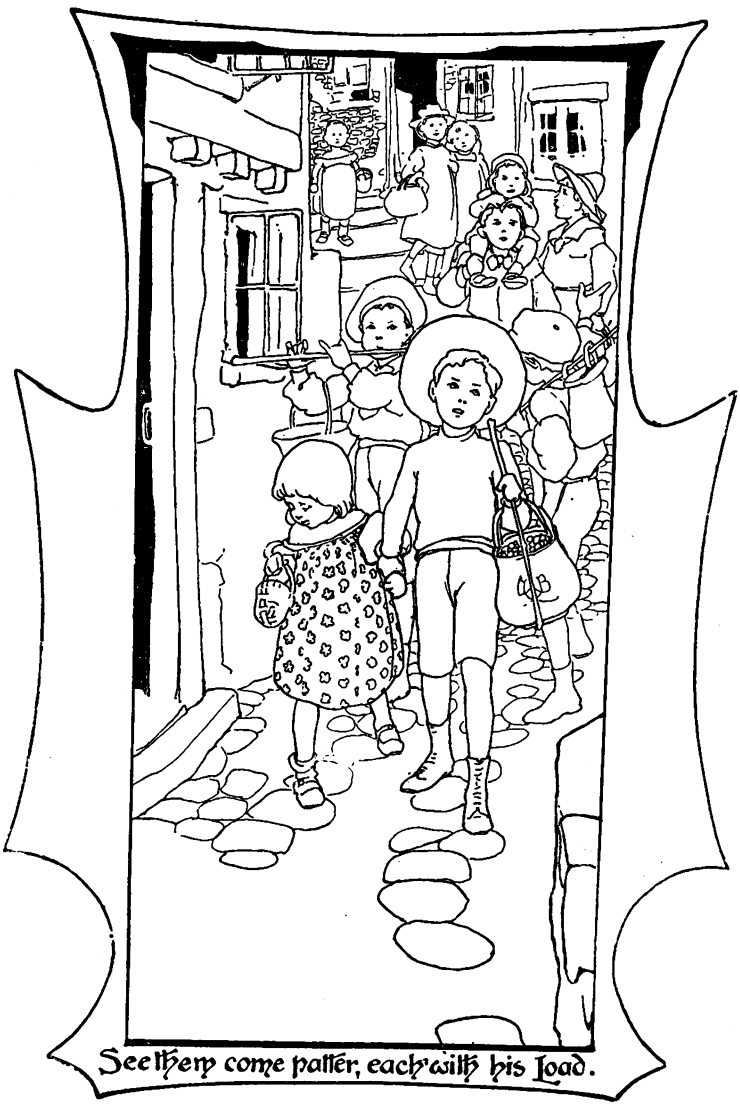

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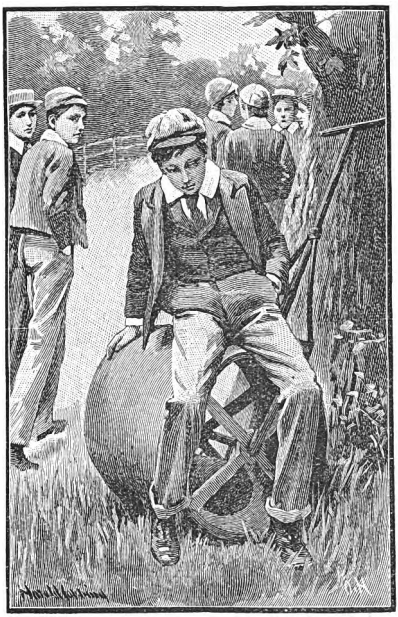

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